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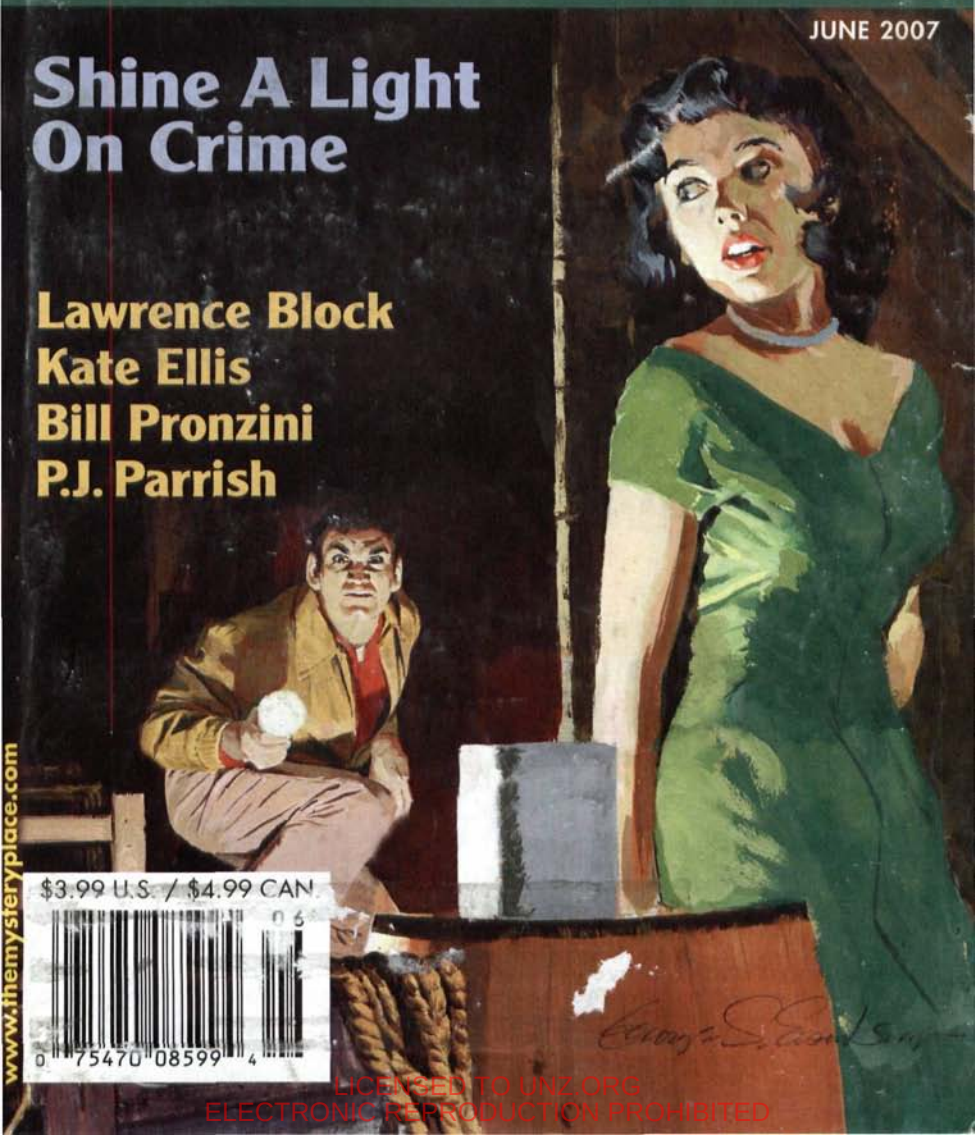

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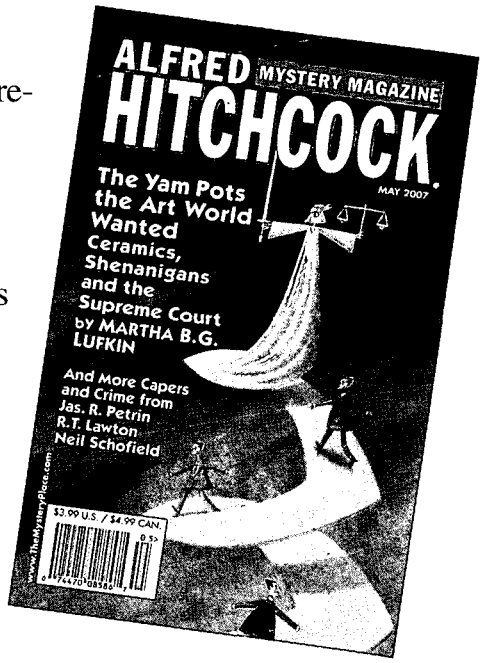

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Dell Magazines
475 Park Avenue South
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Art by Mark Evans

A Vision in White

by Lawrence Block

The game changed over time. Technology made change inevitable: Racquets were larger and lighter and stronger, and even shoes got a little better every few years. And human technology had much the same effect; each generation of tennis players was taller and rangier than the one before it, and players improved on genetics by getting stronger through weight training and more durable through nutrition. So of course the game changed. It had to change.

But the players still—with rare exception—wore the traditional white clothing, and that was one thing he hoped would never change. Oh, some of them sported logos, and maybe that was inevitable, too, with all the money the corporations were throwing around. And you saw colored stripes on some of the white shirts and shorts, and periodically the self-appointed Brat of the Year would turn up in plaid shorts and a scarlet top, but by and large white prevailed.

And he liked it that way. For the women, especially. He didn't really care what the men wore, and, truth to tell, found it difficult to work up much enthusiasm for the men's game. Service played too great a role, and the top players scored too many aces. It was

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the long drawn-out points that most engaged him, with both players drawing on unsuspected reserves of strength and tenacity to reach impossible balls and make impossible returns. That was tennis, not a handful of 120-mile-an-hour serves and a round of applause.

And there was something about a girl dressed entirely in white, shifting her weight nervously as she waited for her opponent to serve, bouncing the ball before her own serve. Something pure and innocent and remarkably courageous, something that touched your heart as you watched, and wasn't that what spectator sports were about? Yes, you admired the technique, you applauded the skill, but it was an emotional response of the viewer to some quality in the participant that made the game genuinely engaging, and even important.

A Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America, and one of the nation's most popular crime novelists, Lawrence Block hasn't always devoted as much time to short fiction as fans of his taut short stories might wish. This year we're lucky; *EQMM* has three of his stories in its lineup, and there's a new book of Keller stories, *Hit Parade* (William Morrow), not long off the presses and also out in audio.

Interesting how some of them engaged you and others did not.

The one who grunted, for example. Grunted like a little pig every time she hit the ball. Maybe she couldn't help it, maybe it was some Eastern breathing technique that added energy to her stroke. He didn't care. All he knew was that it put him right off Miss Piglet. Whenever he watched her play, he rooted for her opponent.

With others it was something subtler. The stance, the walk, the attitude. One responded or one didn't.

And, of course, the game the woman played was paramount. Not just the raw ability but the heart, the soul, the inner strength that enabled one player to reach and return shots that drew no more than a futile wave from another.

He sat in his chair, drew on his cigarette, watched the television set.

This one, this Miranda DiStefano. Sixteen years old, her blond hair hanging in a ponytail, her face a perfect oval, her nose the slightest bit retroussé. She had a slight overbite, and one closeup revealed braces on her teeth.

How charming . . .

He'd seen her before, and now he watched her play a match she was not likely to win, a quarterfinal that pitted her against one of the sisters who seemed to win everything these days. He liked both sisters well enough, respected them as the dominant players

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of their generation, but they didn't engage him the way Miranda did. She didn't have to win, he just wanted to watch her play, and do the best she could.

A vision in white. Perfectly delightful and charming. He wished only the best for her.

There were sports you could see better on television. Boxing, certainly. Even if you sat at ringside, you didn't get nearly as good a view of the action as the TV camera provided. Football was a tossup; at home you had the benefit of good closeup camera work and instant replay, while from a good stadium seat you could watch a play develop and see the whole of a pass pattern. Basketball was better in person, and hockey (if you could endure it at all) was only worth watching in person; on TV, you could never find the bloody puck.

TV covered tennis reasonably well, but it was much better in person. The court was small enough so that, from a halfway decent seat, you were assured a good view of the whole of it. And, of course, watching in person had other benefits that it shared with other sports. There were no commercials, no team of announcers droning on and on, and, most important, it was exciting in a way that televised sport could never be. You were there, you were watching, it was happening right before your eyes, and your excitement was magnified by the presence of hundreds or thousands of other similarly excited fans.

He'd been here for the entire tournament, and was glad he'd come. He'd managed to see some superb tennis (as well as some that was a good deal less than superb) and he'd made a point of watching all of Miranda DiStefano's matches. The blond girl won her first two matches in straight sets, and he'd sat there beaming as she dispatched both opponents quite handily. In the third round, his heart sank when she double-faulted to lose the first set tiebreaker, then had her serve broken midway through the second set. But she rallied, she summoned up strength from within, and broke back, and went on to win that set. The final set was no contest; Miranda, buoyed by her second-set comeback, played brilliantly, and you could see the will to win drain out of her opponent, a black-haired Croatian girl who was five inches taller than Miranda, with muscles in her arms and shoulders that hinted at either steroids or a natural abundance of testosterone.

And Miranda crushed her. How his spirit soared to see it!

Now she was playing in the quarterfinals, and it looked as though she was going to beat the bigger, taller girl on the opposite side of the net. A strong player, he thought, but lacking finesse. All power and speed, but no subtlety.

A lesbian, from the look of her. He hadn't heard or read anything to that effect, but you could tell. Not that he had anything

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against them. They were as ubiquitous in women's sports as were their male counterparts in ballet and the design trades. If they played good tennis, he could certainly admire their game.

But he wouldn't leave his house to watch a lesbian, let alone travel a few hundred miles.

He watched, his heart singing in his chest, as Miranda worked the ball back and forth, chasing her opponent from one side of the court to the other, running the legs off the bigger girl. Running her ragged, crushing her, beating her.

He was there two days later, cheering her on in the semifinals. Her opponent was one of the sisters, and Miranda gave her a good fight, but the outcome was never in doubt. He applauded enthusiastically every time she won a point, cheered a couple of difficult returns she managed, and took her eventual loss in good grace—as did Miranda, skipping up to the net to congratulate the girl who beat her.

A good sport, too. The girl was one in a million.

He knew better than to write to her.

Oh, the impulse was there, no question about it. Sometimes he found himself composing letters in his head, but that was all right. You could write anything to anybody in the privacy of your own mind. It was when you put your thoughts on paper and entrusted them to the mails that things could go wrong.

Because there were a lot of lunatics out there. An attractive young woman could find herself an unwitting magnet for the aberrant and the delusional, and a letter from a devoted fan could seem as fraught with potential danger as one threatening the life of the President. There was a difference, you wouldn't get in trouble writing a fan letter, but the effect on its recipient might be even greater. The President of the United States would never see your letter, a secretary would open it and hand it over to the FBI, but a young tennis player, especially a relative novice who probably didn't get all that much fan mail, might well open it and read it herself.

And might take it the wrong way. Whatever you said, however you phrased it, she might read something unintended into it. Might begin to wonder if perhaps this enthusiastic fan might be a little too enthusiastic, and if this admiration for her athletic ability might cloak a disturbing obsession.

And what, really, was the point in a fan letter? To reward the recipient for the pleasure her performance had brought him? Hardly, if such a letter were more likely to provoke anxiety than to hearten. What kind of a reward was that?

No, it was the writer's own ego that a fan letter supported. It was an attempt to create a relationship with a stranger, and the only fit relationship for two such people was distant and anonymous. She played tennis, and sparkled on the court. He watched,

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rapt with enjoyment, and she didn't even know he existed. Which was as it should be.

In the letters he wrote in the privacy of his own mind, sometimes he was a wee bit suggestive, a trifle risqué. Sometimes he thought of things that would bring a blush to that pretty face.

But he never wrote them down, not a sentence, not a word. So where was the harm in that?

Her game was off.

Last month she'd played in the French Open, and the television coverage had been frustrating; he'd only been able to see one of her matches, and highlights of others. She didn't make the quarterfinals this time, went out in the third round, beaten in a third-set tiebreaker by an unseeded player she should have swept in straight sets.

Something was missing. Some spark, some inner fire.

And now she was back in the States, playing in the women-only Virago tournament in Indianapolis, and he'd driven almost a thousand miles to watch her play, and she wasn't playing well. At game point in the opening set, the girl double-faulted. You just didn't do that. When the serve had to be in or you lost the set, you made sure you got that serve in. You just did it.

He watched, heartsick, as his Miranda lost point after point to a girl who wasn't fit to carry her racquet. Watched her run after balls she should have gotten to, watched her make unforced errors, watched her beat herself. Well, she had to, didn't she? Her opponent couldn't beat her. She could only beat herself.

And she did.

Toward the end, he tried to inspire her through sheer force of will. He narrowed his gaze, stared hard at her, willed her to look at him, to meet his eyes. And she just wouldn't do it. She looked everywhere but at him, and a fat lot of good it did her.

Then she did look over at him, and her eyes met his and drew away. She was ashamed, he realized, ashamed of her performance, ashamed of herself. She couldn't meet his eyes.

Nor could she turn the tide. The other girl beat her, and she was out of the tournament. He'd driven a thousand miles, and for what?

He wrote her a letter.

I don't know what you think you're doing, he wrote, *but the net result—no pun intended—is to sabotage not merely a career but a life.*

He went on to the end, read the thing over, and decided he didn't like the parenthetical *no pun intended* bit. He copied the letter over, dropping it and changing *net* to *overall.* Then he signed it: *A Man Who Cares.*

He left it on his desk, and the next day he rewrote it, and added some personal advice. *Stay away from the lesbians,* he counseled

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her. *They're only after one thing. The same goes for boys. You could never be happy with someone your own age.* He read it over, copied it with a word changed here and there, and signed it: *The Man Who Loves You.*

The following night he read the letter, went to bed, and got up, unable to sleep. He went to his desk and redrafted the letter one more time, adding some material that he supposed some might regard as overly frank, even pornographic. *The Man For Whom You Were Destined.* The phrase struck him as stilted, but he let it stand, and below it, with a flourish, he signed his name. He destroyed all the other drafts and went to bed.

In the morning he read the letter, sighed, shook his head, and burned it in the fireplace. The words, he thought, would go up the chimney and up into the sky, and, in the form of pure energy, would find their way to the intended recipient.

Her next tournament was in a city less than a hundred miles from his residence.

He thought about going, decided against it because he didn't want the disappointment. He'd developed a feeling for her, he'd invested emotionally in the girl, and she wasn't worth it. Better to stay home and cut his losses.

Better to avoid her on television as well. He wouldn't tune in to the coverage until she was eliminated. Which, given the massive deterioration of her game, would probably come in the first or second round. Then, once she was out of it, he could sit back and watch the sport he loved.

But, perversely, she sailed through the opening rounds. He read the sports pages every morning, and noted the results of her matches. One reporter commented on the renewed determination she was showing, and the inner reserves upon which she seemed able to draw.

There's a sparkle in her eye, too, he added, *that hints at an off-court relationship.*

He was not surprised.

She won in the quarterfinals, won again in the semis. He didn't watch, although the pull toward the television set was almost irresistible.

If she reached the finals, he promised himself, then he would watch.

She got there, and didn't have to contend with either of the formidable sisters; one had skipped the tournament with a sore heel tendon, while the other lost in the semis to Ana Dravic, the Croatian lesbian he'd watched Miranda lose to in a quarterfinal match when she was still his Miranda, pure and innocent, glowing with promise. Now Miranda would play Dravic again, for the tournament, and could she win? Would she win?

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She lost the first set 4-6, won the second in a fierce tiebreaker. She was on serve in the first game of the third and final set, won that, and then broke Dravic's serve to lead two games to none.

And then her game fell apart.

She double-faulted, made unforced errors. She never won another game, and, when she trotted up to the net to congratulate the hulking Croatian, the TV commentators were at a loss to explain what had happened to her game.

But he knew. He looked at her hand as she clasped Dravic's larger hand, caught the expression on her face. And then, when she turned and looked into the camera, looked straight at *him,* he knew that she knew, too.

Her next tournament was in California. It took him four days to drive there.

He went to one early-round match, watched her win handily. Her tennis was purposeful, efficient, but now it left him cold. There was no heart and soul in it. It had changed, even as she had changed.

At one point, she turned and looked him right in the eye. Her thoughts were as clear as if she'd spoken them aloud, as if she'd shouted them into his ear. *There! What are you going to do about it?*

He didn't go to any more of the matches, hers or anyone else's. He stayed in his cheap motel, smoked cigarettes, watched the television set.

When he smoked, he removed the white cotton glove from the hand that held the cigarette. Otherwise, he kept the gloves on while he was alone in his room.

And periodically he emptied his ashtray into the toilet and flushed the cigarette butts.

He was ready. He knew where she was staying, had driven there twice and scouted the place. He had a gun, if he needed it. It was untraceable, he'd bought it for cash at a gun show from a man with a beard and a beer belly and a lot to say on the subject of government regulation. He had a knife, equally impossible to trace. He had his hands, and flexed them now, imagining them encircling her throat.

And there was nothing to connect him to her. He'd never sent a letter, never met her face to face, never given another human being the slightest hint of the way he and she were bonded. He'd always driven to the tournaments he'd attended, always paid cash at the motels where he stayed, always registered under a different false name. Never made a phone call from his room, never left a fingerprint, not even so much as a DNA-bearing cigarette butt.

He would stalk her, and he would get to her when she was alone, and he would do what he'd come to do, what he had to do. And the world would never know why she'd died, or who had killed her.

He was confident of that. And why shouldn't he be? After all, they'd never found out about any of the others. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE ROBBER'S GRAVE

by Paul Halter

Translated from the French by John Pugmire and Robert Adey

"Paul Halter, a forty-something Frenchman, has donned the mantle of the great John Dickson Carr and has to date produced twenty-nine novels and a collection of short stories, all replete with cunning clues, brain-twisting puzzles, and always fair-play solutions," says his translator John Pugmire. This is the pseudonymous Halter's fourth appearance in *EQMM*.

"Why is there a gravestone here? Well, because grass doesn't grow there anymore!"

Silence followed the words of Rene Baron, a jovial little man with a Charlie Chaplin moustache. There being few customers at the Two Crowns inn that evening, Baron, the owner, had come out from behind the bar to join his friends Charles Bilenski and Mike Felder and a passing visitor, one Dr. Alan Twist. From the start, Rene Baron had been intrigued by the presence of the tall, thin, elderly stranger at that time of year—the end of winter—when strangers were a rare sight. Even though, like his two friends, he was unaware that the man before him was an amateur sleuth so gifted that Scotland Yard frequently availed itself of his services, he had nevertheless sensed something out of the ordinary about him. With his calm demeanour, his unhurried movements, and his old but immaculate tweed jacket, Dr. Twist effortlessly commanded respect.

If truth be told, the eminent detective was feeling far from sure of himself. He was coming to realise, with some bitterness, that he was now well past the age when he could, on the spur of the moment, jump into his car and get away from the noise and bustle of London to lose himself in the peaceful English countryside. That evening, he had finished up in some desolate spot far across the border in darkest Wales, having started his journey heading west in total abandon. His early enthusiasm had gradually dissipated

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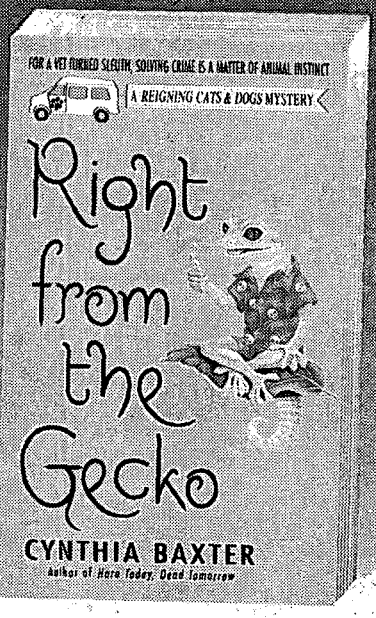
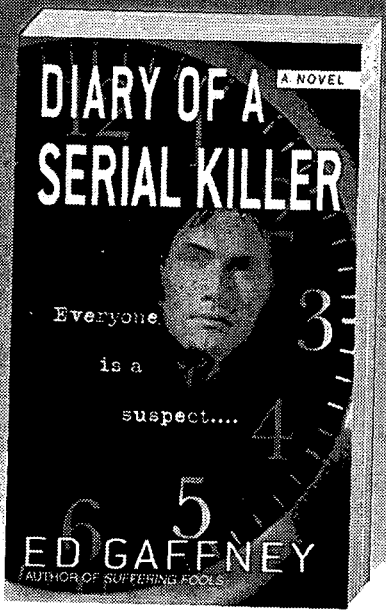
A DEAD REPORTER . . . A SERIAL KILLER . . .


FOR A VET TURNED SLEUTH, SOLVING CRIME IS A MATTER OF ANIMAL INSTINCT
A REIGNING CATS & DOGS MYSTERY
Right from the Gecko
CYNTHIA BAXTER
author of Here Today, Dead Tomorrow

For veterinarian-turned-amateur sleuth Jessica Popper, solving crime is a matter of animal instinct. Now, she puts romance and business on the back burner to investigate the death of a reporter in the newest entry in the *Reigning Cats & Dogs* series.



Defense attorneys Terry Tallach and Zack Wilson reunite to probe the case of a notorious serial killer in this power-house novel of legal suspense from the author of the "electric, tingling" (*The Los Angeles Times*) *Premeditated Murder.*

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the further he traveled along narrow roads winding between barren hills and seemingly leading nowhere. In fact, the absence of signposts coupled with his increasing tiredness and the fading light had nearly proved fatal, and it was only by luck that he had managed to brake in time to avoid driving off a cliff. He had quickly decided to find refuge if he were not to spend the night under the stars, another old custom that had fallen victim to his advancing years.

Having just passed through a small village, he had turned back to try his luck there, and that was when he had noticed the strange plot of land on its outskirts, a remarkably flat field totally empty except for a large monument at its centre: a moist stone slab glistening dully under the pale light of the moon. What was it? Probably some kind of grave or memorial to the dead, for what else could it have been? He had shivered without knowing why. Was it the sight of the grave or the cool of the night? Or perhaps the wind moaning mournfully over the rooftops?

Even after getting a room at the inn, and despite the owner's warm welcome and the heat of a roaring fire, he had been unable to shake off a feeling of unease, as if the shadow of the strangely moist stone had followed him into the rustic hostelry. In an attempt to rid himself of the feeling, he had struck up conversation with the others, hoping to find an explanation. But the reaction of the three men had not been what he had expected: Their faces had clouded at his question.

Dr. Twist swallowed his scotch and frowned. "You say the grass doesn't grow there anymore? It seems to me that I saw a wide green field back there."

"All around it, yes," replied Mike Felder, a forty-year-old of military bearing and frank expression. "But at that particular spot, no. That's why we laid that stone, so that nobody would notice the bare patch."

The detective's astonishment grew. "I don't understand . . . Are you telling me the grass doesn't grow *only* on those few square feet?"

"Yes."

"But that's—"

"Absurd. Quite so, but it's nevertheless true. Everyone around here knows it. The grass stopped growing in that particular spot more than a hundred years ago. And it's stayed that way despite several attempts to remedy the situation."

Charles Bilenski, the shortest of the three friends and also the most discreet, interrupted the discussion in an accent that betrayed his Slav roots: "You have to understand, the grass cannot grow there, *it's no longer possible.*"

"No longer possible," echoed Twist. "Why the devil can't it grow there?"

With a placid smile tinged with a touch of malice, Rene Baron declared: "That, my dear sir, is a mystery that science cannot explain. But I imagine you would like to learn about the origin of

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this curious phenomenon?"

"Yes, I'd be much obliged."

The innkeeper replenished the glasses before starting his strange tale. He spoke with the singsong tones of his native southern France. His accent, in contrast to that of Bilenski, was scarcely noticeable, but Twist was able to detect it, having vacationed frequently in the region. Furthermore, he had noticed a framed photograph hanging behind the bar which showed Rene Baron in his youth. He was playing *boules* with his friends against a background of an old Mediterranean port. An adjacent photograph was even more revealing: It showed three young men in R.A.F. uniform standing proudly in front of a Spitfire. Despite the passage of time, Twist had no difficulty in recognizing his three companions.

"About a hundred years ago," his host began, "a certain Idris Jones, a traveler in the region, was arrested for murder, denounced by a couple of blackguards who claimed to have seen him beat an old beggar to his death while robbing him. Jones claimed that it was, on the contrary, the two ne'er-do-wells that had killed the old man. I don't know what tipped the scales—possibly it was because he wasn't a local—but the fact is he was strung up high despite his heated denials."

"Justice was pretty swift in those days," observed Mike Felder. "But it seems very likely it went awry in this case."

"Yes," continued Rene Baron solemnly. "Idris Jones went to the gallows still protesting his innocence, and in a loud voice he pleaded with God not to allow a blade of grass ever to grow over his grave, to prove it. Shortly after he was laid to rest—at some distance from the village because some people opposed a criminal being buried there—the grass first turned yellow and then disappeared. And it has never grown there since."

The innkeeper paused for a moment and then asked: "So, what do you think, Doctor?"

The detective stroked his moustache meditatively. "The ways of the Lord are mysterious indeed, but it's as well to be cautious about this kind of story. I never cease to be amazed by the human capacity for mischief, and the astonishing ruses that have been perpetrated."

"Hmm," responded the innkeeper. "You're sceptical, Doctor. It's understandable. We all were at one time or another. I'll let our friend Mike, who also happens to be the village mayor, take the floor."

Turning toward the photo of the young pilots, Felder began: "I see you've noticed which armed force we were in when we were defending our country, Doctor. Time has gone by and we are still alive, whereas a number of our colleagues weren't so lucky."

"They are still with us in our thoughts, sir," said Twist, solemnly.

"Yes, of course. In fact nobody came out of the war unscathed. We've all had to count our dead and wounded. But at the same time, for those of us who did manage to survive, strong bonds of

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friendship were formed. It's how we were able to get through it all. For me, it was slightly easier, having been accustomed to . . . shall we say . . . a certain austerity in life: I was an orphan. Rene, however, lost his whole family in Marseilles, which is why, after his tour of duty in the R.A.F. was over, he didn't go back."

"Poor me!" smiled the innkeeper. "And it wasn't always easy. There isn't much in the way of Mediterranean sunshine around here. But I came to understand that, when the sun doesn't shine in the sky, it hides in men's hearts. And I'm so contented here I wouldn't want to live anywhere else, believe me."

"As for our friend Charles here, he also suffered a great loss after the war, and he wouldn't leave the village for all the tea in China, isn't that right, Charles?"

Charles grunted his agreement. With his stooped posture, blotchy skin, and shifty eyes behind horn-rimmed spectacles, Bilenski did not impress. Twist suspected a fondness for the bottle, and the number of beers he had consumed since Twist's arrival did nothing to discourage that impression.

"Don't be fooled, Doctor," continued Felder. "Our friend was one of the great heroes of the last war. Rene and I weren't exactly amateurs at the controls of a Spitfire, but Charles was a true virtuoso. He was showered with medals and his name sent shudders of fear through the old *Luftwaffe.* All this is to make the point that when my two friends decided to come here to settle down, they didn't believe a word of the story either, when I told them about it. They even laughed at me. I have to admit that one didn't see then the beautiful lawn around the grave that one sees today. It was actually more of a wasteland covered in stones. There was grass, though . . . everywhere but where the grave lies. People in the past had tried to make it grow, but without success. Eventually we decided to plant a few yew trees around the grave to hide the infamous patch and forget about it. The kids were always playing there and some of us thought the ground remained bare because of them running around there. Didn't we, Rene?"

"Well, that was my theory," agreed the man from Marseilles. "Although I didn't care much one way or the other; my job was, and still is, to quench thirsty throats, and Lord knows there are enough around here! But I have to say not everyone saw things the same way, notably that developer from Bristol. Do you remember him?"

"As if it were yesterday," said Felder, who had turned crimson. "A chap called Evans, resourceful enough, but too full of himself, and tricky besides. He'd managed to buy the land by using his contacts, despite objections by the then mayor and myself—though I was only assistant mayor at the time. He was going to create a golf course right bang in the middle of that land, and follow it with a luxury hotel. And he had the nerve to walk into our office to announce it."

"I had just bought this place," said Rene Baron, "and I don't

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mind telling you he gave me a fright. I remember someone telling him about the area where the grass wouldn't grow, which would pose a problem for the golf. He laughed until he cried, claiming he'd overcome many challenges a lot more difficult than that. That evening, in front of all the customers at the bar, he vowed to break the ancient curse or abandon the project."

"As far as he was concerned," continued Felder, "the matter was already settled. A few days later, he had removed the earth between the yews to a considerable depth and had replaced it with a rich loam which he had then seeded. The grass had scarcely started to grow before it turned yellow. Naturally he did not give up after the first setback. He dug up all the surrounding area, replaced the earth on the grave itself, and brought in the best gardeners in the region, but to no avail. That's when he began to suspect that one of us was sabotaging his efforts."

"By spraying the grave with weed-killer?" asked Twist, with a smile.

"Yes, because he had already taken precautions. Precautions which became more and more stringent until, some would say, they bordered on paranoia. The fellow wasn't used to failure. The grass that failed to grow had become an obsession with him: a blow to his self-respect which needed to be redeemed. So he set about doing everything possible to neutralise the 'enemy.' Without regard to the cost of materials or labour, he had a wall built around the affected area, at a distance of about twenty yards from the grave. When it was finished, it was in the form of a square, six feet high all around. In the middle of one side there was a metal grille serving as a gate. When it was all built, he placed trained dogs to guard the perimeter. Despite all that, plus a new round of soil and fertilizer, the grass still refused to grow."

Dr. Twist lit his pipe, paused for a moment, then asked: "How were the yews arranged and how high were they?"

"They were planted close together in the shape of a rectangle two or three times the size of the grave itself. They formed a thick hedge about six feet high, with a narrow opening so that the access path from the gate could reach the grave." A mocking gleam came into Felder's eye. "If I'm following your train of thought correctly, you're wondering if someone could have used a hose pipe or water pump?"

"Yes, or something of that nature. But under the circumstances, that's not possible. The poisonous liquid from the jet would have sprayed almost everything except the grave, not to mention the distance involved. To produce a jet reaching twenty yards would have required a fire engine!"

"Quite. And that's what Evans thought as well. Several months went by and he came close to a nervous breakdown because of the repeated failure of his efforts. That was when he decided to put a couple of guards inside the walls and even one on the outside. Pro-

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fessionals, young and alert every one, with a second team to take over so that the grave was guarded day and night.

"Nevertheless, they never found anything suspicious. The dogs howled a couple of times; that's about it. Just false alarms. And still the grass wouldn't grow. Evans was literally mad with anger and frustration. When someone suggested that the shadow from the yews was at fault, or maybe their roots were rendering the ground sterile, he didn't hesitate to have them cut down. When that was done, there remained a magnificently flat lawn inside the tightly monitored wall. But nothing changed. The earth around the grave remained stubbornly barren. As soon as seeding restarted, tender shoots of grass would appear, turn yellow, and die. It was as if the ground there really was cursed."

"Incredible," said Twist, shaking his head. "And you say that nowhere else was the ground afflicted by the 'curse'?"

"No, only the rectangle above the wretched and probably innocent Idris Jones." There was the ghost of a smile on Felder's severe features. "Something tells me, Doctor, that you are as sceptical as that businessman. Evans may not have had much charm, but he wasn't a fool, believe me. But, at the end, he was convinced—just like all of us—that it wasn't trickery. He abandoned his plans and even stated that, with an unexplained phenomenon of that kind, his customers would have avoided the golf course like the plague. He was so upset, after months of vain effort, that he agreed to tear down the wall, which no longer served any purpose and was spoiling the view of the cliffs from the inn. For our part, we decided to lay that gravestone so that nobody would notice the barren patch in future."

Twist fell silent again, puffing hard on his pipe and causing smoke rings to rise to the ceiling. "If the curse on Jones's grave was really just a dirty trick after all," he said, "I can only see two solutions: Either the weed-killer was released from the ground in some way, or it was released from the air. The former can be ruled out, given the constant presence of the guards and the dogs. The walls, the yew hedge, and the distance eliminate the latter, unless the trickster had some way of hovering in midair with a watering can in his hand in order to sprinkle his favourite rectangle. In other words, he would have to have had a flying carpet!"

"It's a great *Thousand and One Nights* tale you have there, Doctor!" exclaimed the innkeeper, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Yes, a tale which shows the impossibility of human intervention. And yet . . . " His voice trailed away to silence, while the three friends hung breathlessly on his words.

"Does that mean you have found an explanation?" asked Felder, frowning.

"No, not yet," replied the detective hesitantly, looking around. "But I intend to find the key to the puzzle, because I believe I have all the information I need."

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Despite that tantalising announcement, Charles Bilenski stood up, bade farewell to his friends and Dr. Twist, and shuffled slowly out of the room. Hardly had he left when Twist observed: "Your friend seems to be down in the dumps."

"Yes," agreed Felder. "He's always like that. But he's a decent chap, believe me. Now, if you could have seen him during the war . . . he had a swagger, as you can tell from that photograph behind the bar. He was the star, a brilliant hero covered in glory, whom all the ladies longed for at the dances. He ended up marrying the prettiest girl on the base, a girl so pretty she became a model, and that's when things started to go downhill. His fall was as rapid as his rise had been, as if his Spitfire, having reached its zenith, suddenly nosedived and crashed. Return to civil life was hard, and he soon found that he was just one fellow amongst all the others, and he had to work damned hard to earn a living. He turned his hand to several jobs with no success. His wife left him, he turned to drink, and the vicious circle started. On top of all that, he had no family to speak of. He'd brought his parents over from Czechoslovakia to flee the Nazis, but they perished in one of the early *Luftwaffe* raids. I found him by accident one night two years after the war ended standing in front of their bombed-out home. He was drunk, but sufficiently conscious to be crying. So I suggested he come back to this place with me."

"Felder's a good man, too," declared Rene Baron, smiling at Twist. "He helped me pick myself up, too. The longed-for peace turned out to be as brutal a shock as the start of war. After all those years of anguish, the permanent state of alert, the sudden warnings, and the murderous aerial combats, peacetime seemed lifeless and insipid. One never becomes used to danger, but one can become dependent on it. I was heading in the same direction as Charles when I too met Mike again. And thanks to him I've regained my grip on life."

"You're all decent types," said Dr. Twist with a touch of emotion in his voice. "Those of us who've lived through terrible nights during the Blitz owe you all a great debt. That's why I'm determined not to reveal your little secret."

After a moment of silence Felder repeated, in astonishment: "Our little secret?"

The detective looked him straight in the eye. "Yes, your secret: I mean the trick you played on that troublemaker Evans who threatened to destroy the peace and quiet of your village. You, the firebrands, who had found life again by realising that simple things—the peaceful existence of daily routine—are just as satisfying and infinitely more durable than living at a hundred miles an hour, drunk with danger."

There was another silence, after which Felder replied, imperturbably: "Do you have any proof to support your statement?"

"Oh, I can't prove you were all in it together, but I'm sure the trickster was one of you."

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"I must insist," continued Felder, "have you identified him?"

"Yes."

"And determined the method?"

The detective nodded his head in assent, smiling the while, then turned to the innkeeper. "Have you any pastis, Mr. Baron?"

"Pastis?" exclaimed the owner, wide-eyed. "What for?"

"Why, to drink, of course! It's so long since I've tasted any."

"Well, yes, I do have a bottle, but after the whisky and the beer, I'm not sure it's advisable."

"The whisky," replied Twist mischievously, "was to warm me up. The beer was to quench my thirst . . . "

"And the pastis?"

"For intellectual stimulation."

Baron brought the visitor's drink over.

"But you forgot the ice, Mr. Baron," said Twist in astonishment, taking the glass and the pitcher of water.

"Of course," replied the owner, scuttling away. "What was I thinking?"

"In fact," declared the detective, after having tasted the drink at the desired temperature, "I didn't really want it, but it was necessary for my demonstration, and it was that above all that tipped me off by reminding me of one of my own youthful escapades. You'll understand shortly when I explain it to you. Now, since I don't believe in flying carpets, I had to retrace my steps. The solution, in the present case, is actually both earthbound and airborne.

"But let's start from the beginning: How would one spread weedkiller in an area so inaccessible? Answer: by throwing it as a compacted object like a ball."

"Throwing it over a high yew hedge?" said Rene Baron. "That would seem to be rather difficult."

"True, but there was also the gap in the hedge the size of a small door which was, if I've understood correctly, astride the path leading to the gate."

"The gate which was locked and guarded."

"Certainly, but at night our trickster wouldn't have been noticed, particularly if he'd taken advantage of the dogs' barking; he might even have provoked them."

"In short," observed Felder, "someone could have thrown a block of dried powder twenty yards from behind the gate."

"It was feasible, given that the guards made their rounds around the wall, so our man had intervals of time in which to act."

"Right. But it's the actual throwing that seems too risky. A block of dried powder could be blown off course by the slightest wind, not to mention the precision necessary in the first place. At one time or another, it would have landed in the wrong place. And how would the powder have been spread evenly across the grave?"

"With the help of the rain."

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"We have more than our share of it around here, agreed, but still it doesn't rain every night. And someone would be bound to notice the next morning."

"You're right," agreed Twist. "We have to find another method." His eye fell on the bowl of ice brought over by the innkeeper. "What if our man had thrown a large block of ice made with a heavy dose of weed-killer? It would have had time to melt during the night and spread evenly in a pool over the grave."

"There's still the question of accuracy," observed Felder.

A mischievous look glinted behind the detective's pince-nez.

"But suppose the large block of ice was in the form of a ball, like, say, an orange? It would be almost the same weight as a *boule* as you call it." He turned towards the photos behind the bar. "Any *boule* player worth his salt can deliver a series of strikes placed close together; I shouldn't have to explain that to a professional like yourself, Mr. Baron. The *boule* would go over the gate, roll along the path, and go through the gap in the hedge to reach the grave. With half a dozen throws of carefully prepared ice projectiles, there would be no trace left in the morning except some moisture which would be attributed to the early morning dew. No need to do it every night, just after each fresh load of earth."

The smile seemed to be frozen on the face of the man from Marseilles. Pointing to the photograph over the bar, he asked: "Is that how you tumbled to it?"

"Let's say it helped."

"Then congratulations for the deduction, *monsieur,*" said Rene Baron, bowing slightly. "But you know, nobody in the village wanted a huge hotel blocking their view. And all I did was help destiny along a bit. Before Evans appeared, neither I nor anyone else had ever acted that way."

"I don't pretend to have solved the whole mystery, gentlemen," said Twist solemnly.

"So I think it's just as well if we forget the whole thing," said Felder, draining his beer.

"I agree," said the detective. "I know how to hold my tongue, particularly since I had to use a similar scheme myself once. That's why it wasn't too difficult to work out what happened here. There was a neighbour of mine once who used to chase away the local cats with a pitchfork. I was angry and told him that if he didn't cease his barbaric habits, lightning would strike his house and the lawn which he tended so lovingly. He had brought in an especially rich, red-coloured soil from another county just for the lawn."

Dr. Twist plunged his hand into the ice bucket and brought out several blocks. "So, Mr. Baron, like you, I put a strong dose of weed-killer in the ice tray and when night came I sprinkled dozens of ice fragments on the torturer's lawn. A few days later, it looked as if it had caught measles!" ●

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HEAT OF THE MOMENT

by James Lincoln Warren

"I tell you what I think," Tarkauskas said, leaning back in his chair. It was an expensive chair, like everything else in his office. The view of the Hollywood Hills from the picture window behind him was expensive. His golden tan was expensive. His perfectly coiffed blond hair and fit physique were expensive. He stopped to light a cigar. It, too, was expensive: a Ramon Allones from Havana. It was also illegal, which I guess must have made it all the more savory.

James Lincoln Warren's historicals regularly appear in our sister publication, *AHMM*. For his *EQMM* debut, he penned his first contemporary crime story. "The last thing the fiction world needs is more P.I.s based in L.A.," he says, "but I live in L.A. and it seemed that not to take on the daunting task of continuing the tradition would be an act of cowardice." Here's his splendid addition to the P.I. canon! †

"Do they allow smoking in here, Mr. Tarkauskas? Not that I mind, of course."

Tarkauskas took a deep drag. The circle of ash at the end of his corona was uneven, burning quicker along one side than the other.

He blew the smoke toward my face.

"Who's going to tell me different?"

I shrugged. "You were saying . . . "

"That's right. I was saying. I was saying that I think you're nothing but a slick spick in Armani. Fifty years ago you would've been a pachuco in a zoot suit with a switchblade on the end of a long chain and thought it was classy, but now you read *GQ* and pack a Sig Sauer in a suede shoulder rig and think you *really* got class."

"I'm unarmed. And Ferrari isn't a Spanish name, it's Italian. Like the car."

"So you're a Guinea greaseball instead of a beaner greaseball. Either way, you're a cheap thug dressed up like a pimp on Easter."

It's times like these I wish Malone were here instead of me.

"Right," I said, making a point of not raising my voice. "And you're a bohunk neo-Nazi who should be wearing a white sheet with a pointed hood to fit his head. What of it? And let me tell you, moron, you don't smoke a fine cigar like that as if you were some dumb dopehead bogarting a joint."

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He leaned forward and pressed a button on his desk. "I didn't get rich by being a moron."

"No, you got rich by being a thief."

Two minutes later I was being shown the sidewalk by two oxen with shaved heads managing to walk upright in cheap suits. Summer can be brutal in Los Angeles.

That interview went well.

At least I didn't have far to go. The interview had been in West Hollywood at a highrise on Sunset, and our office is on Pico Boulevard in Beverly Hills. As luck would have it, my partner, Custer Malone—yes, his real name, so let's just say that his parents weren't very racially sensitive, a flaw I'm glad to say he didn't inherit, but please, no "Old Cuss" jokes—anyway, Malone was waiting for me there and I had to fill him in on my spectacular performance. He sat at his desk, wearing Levis and a guayabera (evidence he had been doing field work someplace where a suit and tie would have made him conspicuous), his feet wrapped in his shiny oxblood Lucchese boots. I never tire of telling him Lucchese is an Italian name.

"Shucks, Red—" he calls me "Red" not because of my coloring, which is dark, but because my first name is Carmine—"he played you like a Cajun on a fiddle."

"What do you mean? He's a jerk."

"'Course he's a jerk," Malone said sagely in his Texas drawl. "That's the point. Didn't they ever teach you to play poker back at the old Fifth?"

He meant my old precinct. "In Chinatown, it's Pai Gow. In Little Italy, they play Scopone."

"Well, no wonder. I'm talkin' poker, son." Malone is only about eight years older than I am. When he gets paternalistic like this, I think of him as the Senator, an image that isn't hurt by his snow-white hair. "Now, I'm not talking about that no-limit Texas Hold 'Em so popular on TV these days. A real poker player varies his game, and when he hooks a fish, he keeps coming back for more."

"So what are you talking about?"

"Your real professional poker players don't usually play in casinos, Red. They play privately and keep below the radar. They seek out folks with more money than sense, and then they got a guaranteed income for life. So what do you think happens when another good poker player shows up at a game that's already somebody's goose?"

"Goose?"

"As in the laying golden eggs variety."

"Why don't you tell me?"

Malone nodded in that laconic way of his. "The player already there does everything in his power to drive the other guy out. It's your basic alpha-male bull hockey: 'These milk duds belong to me.' He looks for a weakness, tries to piss off the newcomer and get

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him off his game. Racial slurs usually work pretty well. No matter how well the newcomer does, he's not likely to come back."

"Damn." I suddenly felt like a fool. "Tarkauskas saw me coming."

"Yep. But don't worry. I put Zavala on his tail. Something'll turn up."

Jessica Zavala's one of our ops. She's a heart-faced knockdown-gorgeous Latina, and nobody's fool. If anybody could finesse a smartass bigoted gangster, it was her.

"You knew something like this was going to happen." I tried to keep any hint of admiration out of my voice. Sometimes I think Malone has the second sight.

"Bound to. He's a player." He tapped a file on the desk marked "Darryl Tarkauskas" in a Sharpie scrawl. "Son of a gun sure makes for an interesting read."

Tarkauskas came to the attention of our company, California Operatives, Inc. (more colloquially, "Cal Ops"), when a chubby twenty-four-year-old computer geek was missed by his mother.

His dad, Barry Pincus, was a fifty-two-year-old attorney who specialized in family law. "Family law" sounds very wholesome, but believe me, it isn't. It's like being a divorce lawyer, only your clients are more vicious and less civilized. We had done a few background checks and some other routine investigative work for Pincus, and when his son Buddy hadn't been heard from in over a week, Barry's wife Helene called Cus Malone, mainly I guess because he was the only private detective she'd ever heard of. Barry wasn't too thrilled that she called us in, but he knew better than to cross Helene.

Malone and I decided to send Stanley Stowicz, one of our more experienced ops, to interview Helene Pincus, because he has a very reassuring way about him and always manages to have a good rapport with nice middle-aged Jewish ladies. This time, it was a mistake. She sent him packing. By the time Stowicz got back to Cal Ops, he was fuming.

"She called me a clerk," he said. "Twenty-six years a private detective, never a complaint, and you know before I came here, I worked for Continental, and Pinkerton also?—and yet she has the chutzpah to call me a clerk. Me! Says she'll only deal with the boss."

"Guess she wants the best," said Malone drily, quickly adding: "I'm kidding, Stowicz." He pulled out his PDA, checked it, and frowned. "I'm booked solid the rest of the afternoon—appearance downtown. How about it, Red? Feel like visiting the old yenta?"

"I'll go," I said. "Don't take it personally, Stan. We all know what an asset to the firm you are."

"You're welcome to it," he replied. "Yenta is right. Give me somebody polite, instead, like a hopped-up biker on crank, maybe."

But Mrs. Pincus didn't want to meet me at her Fairfax District condo. When I called, she asked me to meet her in the Palisades at

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her son's home. A lot of the streets in Pacific Palisades are as tangled as a can of bait as they switch back on themselves up the hills north of the Pacific Coast Highway. It took me longer than I expected to find the house. It was one of those flat-roofed modern things painted a startling white with glass bricks and steel rails everywhere.

There was a spectacular two-story ocean view from the living room. A loft bigger than my entire apartment overlooked the room itself. In spite of its size, the house had the appearance of a bachelor's place, like a set from a James Bond movie—all steel, chrome, and glass. Spare and clean.

Helene Pincus was an expensively dressed woman in her forties, her hard blue eyes unsoftened by liberally applied makeup. She had probably been extremely handsome in her twenties.

Her first words to me were, "You look like a Vegas lounge singer. Where's the cowboy?"

"Mr. Malone had to be in court and couldn't make it. I'm Carmine Ferrari. Stan said you wanted the boss, and Mr. Malone and I are partners."

"What's your background?"

"Six years as Cus Malone's partner here in L.A., eight years with the NYPD before that. Bachelor's and master's from John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York."

She nodded curtly. "Come upstairs. I want to show you something."

I followed her up a series of carpeted steel slats coming out of the wall to the loft. She led me into what was obviously the master bedroom suite. It was very nice, with a 42-inch LCD HDTV mounted on the wall, a domed skylight big enough for Mount Palomar, and sliding doors leading to a teak deck. The king-size bed was made up. The walk-in closet contained jeans, black dickies, aloha and hip polo shirts, one cheap blue Men's Wearhouse suit, and an assortment of expensive sneakers and Doc Martens. From the clothes, I judged Buddy to be about five eight, weighing somewhere around two hundred and twenty pounds. There were framed science-fiction-film 1-sheets and colorful travel posters of the Grand Canyon on the walls. The whole setup was fussily neat.

"I hate this room," she said, crossing her arms. "It has all the charm of an operating theater. So, Mr. Ferrari, you're a detective. What do you make of it?"

"He likes *Star Trek.*"

"Buddy is twenty-four. His idea of a nutritious meal is a pizza with extra cheese and a six-pack of light beer."

"You're saying that it's too clean."

She nodded. "He was nineteen when he graduated from Stanford, *summa cum laude.* After he was accepted to do his master's at Caltech, he moved back in with us, before he dropped out and got this place. Don't think I'm just being a Jewish mother when I say he's a genius. Brilliant, math whiz, and all that, but a pig,

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much as it pains me to admit it. He wouldn't pick his briefs up off the floor where he dropped them unless he ran out of underwear."

"He probably has a cleaning lady."

She frowned. "As I said, he's twenty-four—a young twenty-four. When he was a teenager, he was the kind of kid who put a 'Keep Out' sign on his door. He doesn't have a girlfriend, at least not that I know about. Somebody cleaned up here, all right, but I don't think it was any cleaning lady."

"Then who?"

She turned on her heel and I followed her back out to the loft. She sat down in a Danish leather-and-chrome settee in front of a glass coffee table and I sat opposite her. She pulled out a case from her purse, deftly removed a cigarette, and lit up.

"He's been gone over a week," she said, sucking on her cigarette. "The message on his business phone says he's away on business." She gave a sharp little bark of a laugh, totally without mirth. "What Buddy knows about business would fit in a thimble. When he says he's taking a business trip, it usually means he's schlepping to Las Vegas or Hawaii with one of his friends to get away from it all. But he's never been gone this long before. Not a whole week."

She took another drag and looked around, noticing there wasn't an ashtray.

"Tell me about Buddy's business," I said.

She shook her head, dumped her ash on the glass of the table, and looked directly in my eyes. "What do I know from computers? When Buddy decided to set up the business, he asked Barry for a good entertainment lawyer. Barry suggested this Armenian, Haig Yarjanian. I don't like him. Too Hollywood. You should start with him."

"Entertainment lawyer—whatever for?"

She shrugged and smashed her cigarette butt out on the surface of the table. "Like I should know?"

Los Angeles has one of the most diverse ethnic populations of any city on earth, and you can take it from me, because I'm from New York. L.A. has the third-largest global concentration of Jews, and the largest populations of Koreans and Iranians in the world outside their countries of origin. The immense size of the black and Latino communities is well known. Little Tokyo downtown and the Sawtelle neighborhood on the Westside have been Japanese for almost a century. East Hollywood and Glendale are Armenian enclaves. And then there are the Chinese, Vietnamese, Russians, Ethiopians, Indians—you name it.

Because of this, Cal Ops has a policy of trying to have as many "ethnic" employees as possible. Malone's idea, and a good one, because you never know which neighborhood you might need to send an op to, and a P.I. needs to blend to be effective. So you'd think that we'd have an Armenian on the payroll.

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Unfortunately, we didn't. Not counting Malone and me, we only employ four ops. Besides Stowicz and Jessica Zavala we have Nora Moon (Korean-American) and John Jett (black). Consequently, Malone decided he would tackle Yarjanian all on his lonesome.

There are uniforms that aren't really uniforms—like the lawyer in a camel cashmere sport jacket, red power tie, navy dress slacks, and black tasseled loafers. For a Texas Ranger, the uniform consists of a spotless white shirt with two Western-style button-down breast pockets, a conservative tie with a perfect Windsor knot, a dark three-button whipcord suit with a single vent, a broad white Stetson sporting a classic stovepipe block, and, of course, boots. Not forgetting the hip-mounted Colt Gold Cup.

The Senator mostly gave up the Stetson, it being a little out of place in L.A. except at the Rose Parade, but otherwise retained his dress habits. He likewise retained the habit of recording his interviews, then immediately transcribing them. You can use contemporaneous notes when giving evidence in court, and Malone is nothing if not methodical. Rule Number One at Cal Ops is, *Document everything.*

When he got back, I listened to the tape.

MALONE: *Thanks for seeing me, Mr. Yarjanian.*

Malone had found a publicity photo of the lawyer. I studied it as I listened. In it, Yarjanian stood in his office next to a famous basketball player, smiling broadly, his eyes nonetheless exuding a vulpine coldness. He wore his wavy hair long, almost to his shoulders, and in spite of being dwarfed by the hoop artist, you could tell he was tall. He looked about thirty-eight, forty.

YARJANIAN: *Anything to help the family, Mr. Malone. Barry Pincus is a dear friend. A lovely man.*

MALONE: *I know you can't divulge anything that might compromise attorney-client privilege, but Mrs. Pincus thought you might be able to help us find her son.*

YARJANIAN: *Well, I only did a little work for Buddy, all of it a matter of public record. It was important work, sure. But Pleiades has its own house counsel now, so I wouldn't know about that.*

MALONE: *Pleiades?*

YARJANIAN: *The company Buddy put together with Darryl Tarkauskas.*

MALONE: *Sorry, but this is the first I've heard about it. What kind of company?*

YARJANIAN: *Computer entertainment industry. The future, baby. Within ten years, TV and film will be toast. Listen to me. If you're smart, you'll catch the wave. I can set you up with some excellent opportunities—*

MALONE: *That's the sort of thing I have to let the investors in the agency handle. I'll mention it to them. But getting back to Buddy—*

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Of course, Malone didn't mention that he and I were the only so-called "investors" in Cal Ops.

YARJANIAN: *Right. Anyway, Buddy came to me because he thought he could make a lot of money with an invention of his. He already had the patent, but he needed investors and a connection for content.*

MALONE: *What kind of invention?*

YARJANIAN: *Video data compression. You've heard of MP3? It's a way to reduce the size of digital audio files. That's audio data compression. Instead of having to replace a tape or a CD in your Walkman, you get an iPod the size of a credit card and listen to hours and hours of music in MP3 format. There's also video data compression, but Buddy invented a new process that was vastly better than any other standard. His idea was to market entire libraries of movies on a little gizmo you could fit in the palm of your hand. He didn't want the kind of trouble that went with the whole Napster file-sharing debacle, and so he came to me. But I told him without the product—his so-called "vPod"—there wasn't much I could do. You ever make a pitch to Hollywood?*

MALONE: *Can't say as I have.*

YARJANIAN: *Well, you got to have something to make a buzz with. A fat kid—sorry—with just an idea and no demonstration model isn't likely to win over too many of the hotshot MBAs who decide where to put the money. He has to have something to show them first. That means he needed a partner in the manufacturing segment. I tell you, I thought about investing myself. Glad I didn't, now.*

MALONE: *Why didn't you?*

YARJANIAN: *I'm very good at what I do, Custer—can I call you Custer?—but manufacturing, that's a whole different gig. Finding a factory, suppliers for parts, labor, distribution. Major probs. Buddy needed a venture capitalist. I'm a lawyer. I told him I could help with getting the content, you know, licenses for movies, maybe, but otherwise it was out of my league. But I did say I would make a few calls. That's how he got together with Darryl. I'm glad Buddy found somebody interested, but I was a little pissed off when they decided to get house counsel, especially after I'd put them together. But I guess I see their point. And Pleiades is a real mess.*

MALONE: *So who is this Darryl—what did you say his last name was?*

YARJANIAN: *Tarkauskas. Like I said, he's a venture capitalist. Used to be big into junk bonds. Now he produces schlock teenage slasher pics for the direct-to-video market.*

MALONE: *Tell me about Pleiades.*

YARJANIAN: *You know they didn't even let me handle the incorporation? That's gratitude for you. But it's probably just as well, given their problems.*

Pleiades Computer Corporation was in trouble from the begin-

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ning. Buddy might have been a genius, but he was a moody kid completely unequipped to enter the cutthroat world of high-tech business. The company began to hemorrhage as deals fell through one after another, including the costly manufacturing plant they had tried to set up in Baja. Yarjanian seemed to relish giving Malone every embarrassing detail.

At the end of the interview, Yarjanian gave Pleiades Computer's business address on Sunset Boulevard to Malone. And then the parting shot.

YARJANIAN: *I wouldn't worry too much. I've heard that Buddy has a habit of disappearing for a few days with one of his nerd compadres when the stress gets too much. Las Vegas, Hawaii, the Grand Canyon, that kind of thing. I bet he turns up.*

MALONE: *What would it mean for Pleiades if he doesn't?*

YARJANIAN: *That's a good question. Buddy owns the patent outright. He's only licensing it to Pleiades.*

The next day, Buddy did turn up.

Dead.

Two-thirds down the South Rim of the Grand Canyon along a rough trail several miles off the literal beaten path. He was found by a couple of experienced hikers. Cell phone coverage is iffy out there, but they had walkie-talkies and conveyed the news of their grisly discovery to a friend back up on the Rim. She in turn called the authorities.

The body was partially decomposed thanks to the heat and the fact that he'd been there for ten days, but there was no doubt he had died of natural causes. Heat stroke. The second most common cause of death, after falling, in one of the deadliest and most beautiful places on earth. I remembered the posters in his bedroom. It made me sad.

Malone was able to get them to fax us a map showing where the body had been found.

Buddy's death was ruled an accident.

Since we hadn't found out anything useful and Barry Pincus was a regular client, Malone and I decided we should waive our fees for the little work we had put into it. If Cus had just sent the Pincuses a letter explaining what we were going to do, and if Pincus weren't a probate lawyer, that would have been the end of it. But being the sentimental cowboy white-hat that he is, Malone had to call and express his condolences personally. And being the professional courthouse mouthpiece that *he* is, Pincus asked a few questions on cross.

It started with Malone on his desk phone saying, "If there's anything I can do . . ."

He frowned and motioned me to sit down.

"Mr. Pincus, I'm going to put you on speaker." He pressed the

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button and put the handset down.

"Mr. Ferrari is with me now, Mr. Pincus."

"Hello," Pincus said brusquely.

"This is Carmine Ferrari," I said. Not knowing what else to say, I continued, "I'm so sorry about Buddy."

"He was a good boy. Helene is shattered. Nothing will bring him back, but I want to know if you found the money."

Malone's eyebrows went up. He looked at me, a quizzical smile on his lips. "I'm sorry, Mr. Pincus, but Mr. Ferrari and I don't know what money you're talking about."

"Buddy died intestate. I don't know how a son of mine could be so stupid, especially after coming into some money, but there it is. He wasn't married, no kids, and so Helene and I are his heirs. Now, according to the shyster *nafkeleh* at Pleiades, Buddy was flat broke. Everything belongs to the company except the house. What, I just fell off the turnip truck? I tell you, Malone, Buddy was worth millions. I want to know where that money went."

Malone looked at me with a grave expression. "Excuse me a minute, Mr. Pincus." He pressed the mute button on the phone.

"Well? What do you think, Red?"

"Maybe one of us better have a chat with Darryl Tarkauskas," I said.

"I agree. And there's something else been bothering me, too."

"What's that?"

"Didn't Buddy always go off on these mini-vacations with some old amigo? What was he doing all alone like that when he slipped out of the saddle?"

"I don't know. But if we're going to continue, I think we'd better think twice about giving Barry Pincus a free ride."

"Right." He pushed the speaker button. "Mr. Pincus, we think that's a very good question. Let us look into it for you."

"You bet your sweet ass," Pincus said, and that ended the consultation.

The next day I went to go see Tarkauskas.

I should have figured that the Senator only used me to get a rise out of Tarkauskas. Figuratively speaking, I was the bird dog flushing out the game, while Jessica Zavala sat in the blind with the shotgun.

In this case, the "shotgun" was a radio receiver mounted in Jessica's silver Honda Accord (actually her company car). Private investigators are not allowed to apply for wiretaps, and California law prohibits recording telephone conversations without a court-issued warrant or the consent of all parties. But if you have a conversation over a publicly assigned radio frequency, you have no reasonable expectation of privacy, and anybody can legally listen in. Difficult with cell phones, but easy with wireless handsets on landlines, such as Tarkauskas had in his office.

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Malone had no sooner shared his wisdom about playing poker when Zavala reported in. Malone put her on speaker.

"He just made a call to a fitness center in the Valley and asked for some girl named Amber, like she's a personal trainer or something," she said. "He's too smart to say much over the phone, but he did tell her Mr. Ferrari had been here, and that they needed to talk. She sounds like a total bimbo."

"Did they schedule a rendezvous?" Malone asked.

"She went, like, pick her up after work?" Zavala said, sarcastically affecting a Valley Girl accent, "—And they'd, like, talk in the car?"

"No good. Keep on him when he leaves, and let me think about how I can get them to have their powwow somewhere we can overhear them."

"Right, boss." She hung up.

"Johnny did a righteous job on Tarkauskas's background," Malone observed. John Jett had been a detective with the L.A. Sheriff's Department before joining us, and his local connections were golden. "Did you know the boy's got property in Palm Springs? Now I think that's mighty interesting."

He looked me in the eye. "How's about you look into Buddy's friends, the ones he didn't take with him to the Grand Canyon? I only ask you because you get on so well with Helene, and I reckon that's where we should start."

"Grazie, paesan," I said, deadpan. "But this time I'm taking a gun."

Theodore Morganstern had known Buddy since fourth grade, and the two had remained best friends all through high school. When Buddy left for Stanford, Ted had gone to SC and gotten a degree in film. He now worked as a computer animator for a local independent production company. He was as gangly as Buddy had been plump. He affected a sandy moustacheless goatee, loose jeans, and a Von Dutch T-shirt. The only thing missing was a skateboard.

"You know he offered me a job at Pleiades," he told me, trying to keep his fried eggplant focaccia sandwich from falling apart. We were at a chichi bistro on Washington Boulevard in Culver City, the kind of place where the young turks of The Business show up to prove they're beyond cool. "I turned him down, man. I didn't want any job to get in the way of our friendship, know what I'm sayin'?"

"Very noble of you," I said. "Still, I'll bet you let him pay for the trips you guys took together."

"It's like this bond we had," Ted replied. "Whichever one of us got rich first, he'd, like, help out the other. Dude didn't pay for everything, you know, just the ride and the hotel. I like my work and they pay me pretty well." He took a bite from his sandwich and eggplant snot dripped wholesale onto the Formica tabletop.

"Did he use a travel agent?" That's where I'd find records of his trips.

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Ted shrugged. "Usually he booked the hotel on-line, but we didn't bother with airline tickets because of the Hawker."

"The Hawker?"

"Company jet, man. A Raytheon Hawker 1000. Sweet."

"Ah. Why didn't you go with him to the Grand Canyon?"

He shook his head, all the while chewing like a goat, and swallowed. "Never asked me."

"Wasn't that unusual?"

He laughed. "Man, how stupid are you?"

I kept my temper. "Not very."

"Why do you think he didn't ask me? Because he met a chick. A very *hot* chick, like, Buffy in a bikini or whatever, you know, definitely not the kind you'd take home to meet Mom. Hell, I wouldn't have asked me, either."

"Are you sure she went with him?"

"Like he's going to tell me, Hi, Ted, hey, I'm going to take a few days off and go to Arizona to get lucky. No, I can't be sure. But it stands to reason." He snagged another huge bite.

"This girl have a name?"

He smiled again, nodded, swallowed. "Too bad he didn't tell me what it was, though. Our bond wasn't *that* close, *capisce?*"

"How about 'Amber'?"

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"Thanks, anyway," I said, getting up. "Oh, and—*ciao.*"

My caustic farewell was lost on him. He just smiled and cheerily said, "Later, dude!"

When I got back to the office, Stan Stowicz was minding the store. "Where you been?"

"Interviewing a possible wit on the Pincus case," I said. "Where is everybody?"

Stowicz pursed his lips and shook his head. "Don't know. Malone took a call from Jessica and took off."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"Was I supposed to?"

"Tarkauskas must be on the move." I reached for my cell and speed-dialed Zavala.

She picked up on the first ring. "Hello."

"Ferrari. What's the situation?"

"Subject left early, and I trailed him to Victory Fitness in Van Nuys, where he met this Amber. Cute little blonde, but dresses like some *puta.* So I called Malone, and he met me there, then we split up after subject took the girl home, and he followed subject. We didn't get to hear what they talked about. Anyway, now I'm on surveillance outside the girl's apartment in Sherman Oaks. By the way, her last name, at least according to the apartment directory, is Gerhardt."

"Good. Keep me informed, okay?"

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"You got it, boss."

Next I dialed Malone. No answer. I called Malone's wife Brenda at her TV studio. She's a producer for a cable reality show on forensic science. She hadn't heard from Cus but promised she would have him call me as soon as she did.

There was nothing to do at that point but wait. Stowicz cleared his throat.

"What is it, Stan?"

"The Pincus matter. Malone had me look into this patent business."

"What did you find out?"

"Somebody's lying."

"Quick. Call the Action News hotline."

"Very funny. Seriously, I talked some more with that Armenian lawyer, and also with house counsel at Pleiades Computer. The Armenian said that young Pincus owned the patent and licensed it to the company against future profits. House counsel—"

"The shyster *nafkeleh.*"

Stowicz did a double-take. "What?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"Well, house counsel said the *company* owned the patent, that they purchased it from the Pincus boy outright, but for an undisclosed amount. Still, it must have been a pretty big sum. So where's the money?"

"Well, that's the sixty-four-dollar question, isn't it? If Yarjanian is right, that explains why there was no cash. But if house counsel is telling the truth, which seems unlikely—what did you say his name was?"

"Her name. I didn't, but it's Amber Gerhardt."

"Amber Gerhardt."

"What? You look like you swallowed some air."

"Stan, what's a *nafkeleh?*"

"*Shandeh.* A nice New York boy like you, and you don't know? It's Yiddish for 'little whore.'"

"Bound to be Buffy in a bikini."

"You're not making any sense."

"Yes, I am."

My phone sang *"Ch'ella mi creda libero."* Well, not sang, exactly, but I set the ringer to play the tune. It's from *La Fanciulla del West.* After Sinatra, Caruso is my guy. But anything by Puccini will do.

"I was right. She's a hooker," said Zavala triumphantly after I'd answered. "She just got picked up in a stretch Caddy, dressed in a clingy silver lamé camisole, leather miniskirt, and stiletto heels that would do a dominatrix proud. And she's got a suitcase, so I guess it's a long date. I'm following. But I haven't been able to get through to Malone."

"You're close—she actually belongs to the world's *second* oldest

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profession. Stay with her. I'll talk to Cus. Be discreet."

"Tell me something I don't know."

She hung up.

There was something still tickling at the back of my mind. Suddenly I had it. "Stan, do me a favor."

"As long as I get paid. What?"

"The wit I mentioned told me he and Buddy always traveled together in an executive jet. Either Pleiades owns the airplane, or part of it, or they lease it. It's called a Raytheon Hawker 1000. Call around to the local general aviation airports—start with Van Nuys, since it's the biggest—and see what you can dig up."

"Your wish is my command." He sat down and reached for the phone.

I sauntered over to Malone's desk. He had left a yellow legal pad on the blotter. There was something written on the top page. The top word was all in caps and underlined:

BACKPACK

Below that, but in smaller script, was: H_2O?

Cus had left his long-distance phone log next to the pad. Remember, Rule Number One is *document everything,* so I wasn't too surprised to see it there, except for the fact that he usually kept it under the phone. He had made several calls to different numbers in the 928 area code, one for longer than fifteen minutes, that very morning.

I'm a detective. I did what detectives do. I asked about it. "Hey, Stan, where's nine two eight?"

"Between nine two seven and nine two nine. What do you mean, where's nine two eight?"

"Never mind." I pulled out the fax showing where Buddy had died and read the transmission machine's phone number. 928.

The area code for northern Arizona.

"All right, Carmine, I've got your information on the plane," Stan said. "A Raytheon Hawker 1000 executive jet hangared at Van Nuys, jointly owned by four companies, including Pleiades Computer. Because it's a jet, it usually flies at altitude, over 18,000 feet, and that means they have to file flight plans."

"So there's a record of Buddy's trip to the Grand Canyon."

"Sorry. One of the other companies was using it that week. The plane was mostly in Pennsylvania and New Jersey."

So Buddy had kept the Grand Canyon trip a secret. Not hard to see why. Going off to get lucky in Arizona with the kind of girl you wouldn't introduce to Mom. Not only that, but the girl wasn't some tech groupie, she was house counsel, an employee. Office romances can get sticky.

Then it struck me. I speed-dialed Zavala again.

"Tell me you aren't at the airport in Van Nuys," I said.

"What are you, psychic?"

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"Did you see who's with Ms. Gerhardt in the limo?"

"You *are* psychic," she said, her voice a little in awe. "I was about to call you and tell you. It's not a john like I thought. She's with subject."

Tarkauskas.

"Jess, they have to file a flight plan. Find out where they're going. A donut will get you a dozen they're headed for Flagstaff. Call me as soon as you find out." I hit End and dialed the airline. There was a flight at six to Phoenix, with a connection to Flagstaff. I made the reservation and read off my credit-card number to the reservation clerk.

"Stan, you've got to drive me to LAX. And see if you can get ahold of Mr. Malone after you drop me off. Tell him I've gone to Arizona. And tell him he was right."

Some airlines won't let you pack any handguns at all in your baggage. America West follows federal guidelines requiring the weapon be declared, unloaded, and stored in the manufacturer's hardshell container, locked, in your regular unlocked suitcase. You're allowed eleven rounds per weapon, likewise locked in a separate container. Arizona recognizes my California CCW permit, and frankly, it's real easy to get a gun there, so I had to think twice about packing, if you'll pardon the expression. But I didn't know if I'd have time to get another gun, so I packed my main piece, intending to wear it on my belt holster once on the ground, and a little .380 AMT backup, which would go in an ankle holster. I hoped they wouldn't get ripped off en route.

I wasn't sure I'd need a gun, but it seemed like a good idea.

I was almost aboard the jet going to Phoenix when Zavala got back to me. My hunch was right, as I knew it would be. Tarkauskas and Gerhardt had filed their flight plan for Flagstaff. They would get there before me, of course, but if they were going there for the reason I thought, they wouldn't be able to do anything until morning.

My guns came through safely. In Flagstaff, I rented as nondescript a car as I could find, a dark green Ford Escort. Discreet enquiry (a detection trade term of art, that, by which we mean being sneakier than an alley cat at a canary convention) had led me to find out that Tarkauskas had likewise rented a vehicle, predictably a black Escalade, so I spent some time riding around Flagstaff looking in hotel parking lots until I found their car. Then I hunkered down to wait. I knew they'd be up early.

It was before dawn when I saw Tarkauskas, Amber Gerhardt, and one of his bovine thugs climb into the Cadillac. It was the first time I'd actually seen Gerhardt, but this time she wasn't dressed up like a slutty starlet condescending to get loaded in a trendy nightspot. Instead, she was in a khaki ensemble that included a military-cut short-sleeve shirt and a pair of tight shorts revealing her shapely

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bronze legs, and looked like a stripper's take on Indiana Jones—the effect was only partly spoiled by her big Wolverine hiking boots. Zavala was right, she was cute in a kittenish way, more like a high-school cheerleader than some sultry, sophisticated vixen already out of professional school. I would never have pegged her as an attorney.

I let them get a couple of blocks ahead before I started to follow them. I knew their destination, after all. Grand Canyon National Park, the place where Buddy cashed in.

Once they exited I-40 to AZ-64 North, I fell further back until they were out of sight. There wasn't anywhere else they could go. I picked them up again near the entrance to the park.

The ranger on duty there asked me if I was carrying any firearms. I lied and said no. There's an old saying that sometimes it's easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission, and I didn't want to spend several hours in conversation with park rangers debating whether packing heat really was a good thing.

I followed them to a convenience mart in Grand Canyon Village, and while I was there I bought a cheap nylon knapsack and four one-liter bottles of water that just fit inside, being careful to keep a counter or two between myself and them the whole time. The goomba wanted some beer and Tarkauskas told him not to be an idiot, an order which was clearly impossible for the goomba to obey. They left. I climbed back into the Escort and headed out right behind them as they pulled out, leisurely going eastward past the road back to civilization, onward for several miles until they stopped at Yaki Point.

I drove past them for a couple of minutes and then doubled back. Yaki Point marks the trailhead of the South Kaibab Trail, the most direct route down from the South Rim to the Kaibab Bridge and Phantom Ranch at the bottom. In the pellucid morning light, the view was awe-inspiring. You can't be an atheist in the Grand Canyon.

There were clouds at several altitudes, big cottonballs of roiling cumulus, shining pink and ochre and dazzling white, like titanic sheep grazing in a sea-blue pasture, and speeding above them were high threads of coral-tinged silver mare's-tails. The layered buttes and plateaus of the Canyon's brittle walls, softened by the mist, rose out of the morning fog, reminding me of the strange crags and mountains in Chinese paintings. The warm air caressed me, as comforting as a child's sweet-scented blanket.

In the parking lot, I found their black Caddy SUV sitting like a lump of tar on the asphalt. They couldn't be more than three or four minutes ahead of me on the trail.

They had come to destroy evidence of murder, I was certain. Malone had figured out how they had done it, and that it somehow involved Buddy's backpack—Buddy had not been found with a backpack, but the idea of taking a long hike in the Grand Canyon with-

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out one is absurd. That's what his note on the legal pad had meant.

I wasn't sure about Malone's question about water—maybe he thought they had dumped the backpack in the Colorado River, expecting it to be lost. Anyway, it was a sure bet that they were now going after it. I didn't know if they would bring it back with them or get rid of it somewhere in the wilderness, but I couldn't take the chance. I had no choice but to follow.

I had brought a handheld GPS receiver about the size of a cell phone with me from L.A. Not fancy, but I can read a lat/long, and I had the map the park rangers had faxed to Malone showing where Buddy's corpse had been found. I'd taken the precaution of entering the location as a way point in the little receiver. I made sure it was working and then went after them.

I wasn't half an hour down the trail when I realized that somebody was quickly cranking up the thermostat. I'd had to sprint a little to get Tarkauskas and company within sight, and now I was starting to regret it, even though I had no choice. I could tell that they were using the goomba as a pack mule while Tarkauskas and the girl carried smaller packs.

My shirt stuck to my back beneath the cheap knapsack, and I felt perspiration drip from my armpits down my sides. A fine mist of sweat glistened on my arms. It didn't take me long to polish off the first liter of water. I realized I should have brought a hat.

A couple of hours farther down and the headache started. I almost missed it when they left the trail. Checking my GPS, I could see that they were headed toward where Buddy had been found some miles to the west. For some reason the LCD on the little unit was hard to read. Man, it was hot. I drank another liter, careful not to be too greedy.

I followed them along the thin, winding trail leading down into the baking vertical wilderness, careful to remain just hidden. Once I missed my footing and went down like a blubber boy doing a belly flop in a community swimming pool. Luckily I wasn't near the precipice, but I waited for several minutes before picking myself up, in case they had heard me, and when I did stand up, I felt a surge of sickening vertigo that nearly sent me down again. I squatted until I felt better, and reached for another bottle of water.

Somehow I'd lost track of how much I'd drunk. The last bottle was only about one third full. I polished it off. What time was it? My watch wouldn't stay in focus, but I finally realized it was about 2:30 P.M.

I had to hurry to pick up their trail. I couldn't believe the temperature. Engine blocks don't get that hot.

I was mentally drifting, putting one foot in front of the other, when I nearly knocked Tarkauskas over the edge.

He recovered quicker than I did. He stared at me, his face hard with surprise, and he shouted, "Amber! Trouble!"

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I pulled out my gun and leveled it at his chest.

He smirked. "The Sig Sauer, I see."

"It's a Beretta, *cacasenno,*" I said. It was hard to hold the gun steady. "I told you I was Italian."

Amber Gerhardt somehow appeared beside him. I switched my aim point to her.

"Look at him," she said. Her voice irritated me. It was high and nasal. She laughed, a bubbling schoolgirl giggle, and it made me even angrier. My head was buzzing.

"Just let him drop," she said.

"Amber, we can't," Tarkauskas said. "Not twice. We'll get caught."

"All we have to do is make sure that this body is never found," she said. "It was only dumb luck that somebody found Pincus."

I dropped to one knee. It wasn't on purpose.

"The wop's got a partner, Amber. He'll come looking."

"Let him look," she said contemptuously. "If you hadn't hooked up with that Jew-boy in the first place, none of this would have been necessary."

"But Buddy was worth millions."

"Yeah. Millions of somebody else's money," she said, "or have you forgotten who provided us the startup capital in the first place, and what they'll do to us if they find out it was all pissed away?"

"But did you have to bring him out here to die? Jesus, that's cold. Even for me."

"Shut up. You know as well as I do that I had no choice. Do you think I enjoyed having that fat slob pet me like I was some Thai bar girl or something? He would have dragged us all down, Darryl, and you know it. He spent money like a sailor." She laughed again, in that completely out-of-place giggle. "I don't think Mr. Ferrari—it is Mr. Ferrari, isn't it?—is doing so well."

"I'm fine," I said, but it didn't quite come out. Blackness impinged on the edges of my vision.

"I don't think so," she said, reaching for my gun. Somehow I wasn't fast enough to pull the trigger.

When I opened my eyes, I was facedown in the dirt. I managed to look up again. Everything was blurry, but I could make out the goomba with Tarkauskas and Gerhardt.

"I'm thinking we just pitch him over the edge," she said. "That way, his cause of death will be different from Buddy's. People fall off cliffs all the time out here."

She looked at my gun. "You know, this is nice. Sexy."

I reached for the AMT, but too slowly. The goomba stopped me and ripped the little weapon from my ankle holster and smacked the top of my head with it. It hurt, but wasn't much worse than my headache.

"Naughty, naughty," Amber said, as if I were some toddler. She squatted beside me and pointed the Beretta in my face. "Time to

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say goodbye, lover."

I heard a shot.

Then I remember swinging in the air. The chop of moving helicopter blades percussed in the far distance. Hands eagerly grabbed me and pulled me into a small room, where it was mercifully cool. Shade at last. I passed out again.

"Dang, son, you're alive." No mistaking that voice. I opened my eyes.

"Hello, Malone." I was in a Flagstaff hospital bed.

"The correct phrase is, 'Howdy, pardner,'" he said, smiling. "Gave me quite a scare. What the Sam Hill were you thinking, going off like that?"

"I was following your lead. The backpack. I knew they had to go get the backpack."

He shook his head. "Now that's just plain ignorant, Red. Why do you think they would want to recover evidence at that very moment?"

"Because—because—" and then suddenly, I knew. My Italian ire rose. "Because you sent them after it."

"Right in one. I set them up, Red. As you know, Buddy was found dead of heat stroke and without his backpack. Where was the water he should have been carrying in his saddlebags? Somebody must have taken it away, knowing he couldn't survive the canyon's heat without it."

"How do you know he couldn't have survived?"

"'Cause I'm from Texas, and I've spent a little time out in the desert now and again. I don't think there's too many deserts in New York, so you probably wouldn't know what it takes to survive in one. Well, it takes a human body at least two solid weeks to acclimate to a desert climate. Buddy certainly didn't do that. I also told you I thought it was interesting that Tarkauskas had a home in Palm Springs."

"So you told Tarkauskas that the authorities were looking for the backpack, that they suspected foul play."

"Didn't tell him, just let it be known. I was pretty sure he'd try to keep it from the law. So I baited the trap and he fell for it."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I was pretty angry by then. After all, I'd nearly lost my life on the most moronic of quixotic quests.

"How was I to know you were going to gallivant off to Arizona? I thought I had the operation under control. It's not like this is our only case—I expected you'd stay in L.A. until you heard from me. You could have knocked me down with a flour tortilla when we—the park rangers and me, that is—saw you tailing our quarry. You were too close behind them for us to risk pulling you off. We had to wait."

"Until I was half-dead from heat stroke," I said. "Thanks a lot, pardner."

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"Now don't be like that. You got them to confess." He slapped my thigh. "Good work."

"Confess?"

"Parabolic listening dishes recorded everything. I've done stuff like this before, you know, back in Lone Star country. But when that Gerhardt girl put your gun in your face, I knew it was time to call the game, so I put a shot right across her scrawny-ass bows."

"So everything's wrapped up nice and neat."

"It is now. I don't know that they ever would have found the backpack, anyway, so your intervention was well timed. And to prove it, I brought you a get-well present."

He pulled out a portable CD player with a set of light headphones. "Enjoy, son."

So do you think it was Sinatra, or Caruso, or anything by Puccini? Hell, no. It was *The Best of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.* Cus said he wanted me to learn to appreciate real music.

If I could have gotten out of bed, I'd have killed him. But by the time I got back to L.A., I was feeling a bit more generous. So I got tickets for the opera and gave them to Brenda, and she made him sit through an entire production of *Madama Butterfly.* She wept like a teenager for Cio-Cio-San's troubles while he had to stay awake the whole time or face her implacable wrath.

We Italians get revenge. ●

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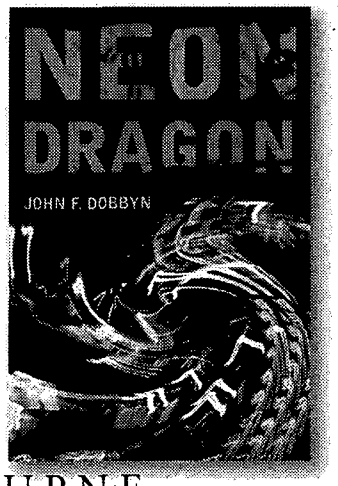

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Art by Laurie Harden

The Angel of Manton Worthy

by Kate Ellis

I felt his tight grip on my arm as I slumped into the passenger seat and when my hand went up to the blindfold he ordered me not to touch it. I did as I was told and clung to the soft leather of the seat, trying to work out where we were heading.

We travelled for hours on a fast, straight road and I guessed that we must be well out of London. When the roads started to wind I sensed that we were out in the country somewhere and we seemed to drive for miles before I felt the car swing sharply to the left. I heard the crunch of gravel beneath the tires as though we were on some sort of driveway, and when we stopped he told me to take the blindfold off. I could see my surprise at last.

I untied the blindfold and sat there blinking as my eyes got used to the light. I'm sure I swore when I realised where I was. But then I saw the excitement on Paul's face—like a little boy at Christmas—and I forced my mouth into a smile until the muscles began to ache. I think I managed to say what he wanted to hear. I could hardly

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have let him know the truth.

I managed to keep the smile in place when he told me the house was called the Old Rectory, and I rushed up to the front door, forcing out enthusiastic oohs and aahs as he pointed out each new desirable feature. He expected excitement and that's what he got. He had the Merc, the million-pound apartment in London, and now he had the place in the country he'd been promising himself for years. To have poured cold water on his triumph would have been like snatching away a kid's birthday present . . . and I couldn't have done that to him. Not when I saw how thrilled he was.

A two-time nominee for the Crime Writers' Association of Britain's Short Story Dagger Award, Kate Ellis is also the author of a series of novels that each combine an intriguing contemporary murder mystery with a parallel historical case. In the U.S. the most recent book available in that series is *A Cursed Inheritance* (Piatkus 2004); in the U.K. *The Shining Skull* is hot off the press. ¶

He was twenty years older than me and too many business lunches meant that what he'd lost in hair he'd gained in weight. But I was fond of him—I suppose I might even have said I loved him if I believed in love, which I don't. We stayed in a hotel in Exeter that evening and he ordered a bottle of champagne to toast our new country life. After the bubbles had booted some of my inhibitions out of the window I asked him if he realised what life was really like in a place like Manton Worthy. But he just laughed and said he'd bought the best house in the village so the peasants could kiss his arse. People in the restaurant looked round and I felt myself blushing. Paul never worried about what people thought . . . unless he was doing business with them.

Looking back, I couldn't complain about the house itself. It was like an oversized doll's house to look at . . . symmetrical with long, square-paned windows painted in gleaming white. Paul said it was Georgian and it had a long gravel drive and a shiny black front door you could see your face in, with bright brass fittings. It had belonged to a TV executive from London who had spent a fortune on the place and only used it on weekends. Inside, the previous owners had kitted it out with gold and silk drapes and thick cream carpets. It hadn't always been like that, of course—once it had been a draughty, rambling place where the old vicar lived; where the parish bigwigs held their long, boring meetings and where the vicar's skinny wife organised her fetes and good works. But times change.

Paul had lived in London all his life and what he knew about the country came from watching old episodes of Miss Marple and reading the colour supplements. He said I should get to know the area, perhaps chat up a few locals . . . there was no harm in cultivating

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useful contacts. But I said no, thanks, I had better things to do, and began to paint my nails. There was no way I was going out there. Not in Manton Worthy.

I had an uncomfortable feeling that it wouldn't be long before things began to go wrong . . . and it turned out I was right. The cockerel next-door started it: cock-a-doodle-bloody-doo over and over again at five o'clock every morning. I knew Paul would take it badly . . . he needed his sleep, and by the third day he was threatening to throttle the bird with his bare hands. I told him that crowing is what cockerels do . . . that it was all part of the country experience. But there was no reasoning with Paul when something annoyed him.

He dealt with it, of course . . . like he dealt with everything. He stormed round to see the farmer, who was called Carter—"an inbred lump in a flat cap and waxed jacket," according to Paul. As soon as I heard Carter's name I knew I had to take care not to get caught up in Paul's little feud.

When the cockerel carried on I tried to convince Paul that you couldn't stop the forces of nature. But he said he'd have a bloody good try if they kept him awake at night. I suggested moving into one of the bedrooms at the back of the house and to my relief he agreed. I started to hint about spending more time at the London apartment, but Paul said that no inbred yokel was going to drive him out of the home he'd worked his backside off for. He always had a stubborn streak.

So there we were, stuck in the middle of nowhere, and as I stared out of our old bedroom window across the rolling green landscape, the sight of Carter's farmhouse squatting there in the field nearby made me shudder. I should have got out then . . . I know that now with hindsight. But how could I have hurt Paul?

Another thing that spoiled the rural peace Paul thought he'd bought was the noise of the church bells. They rang on Tuesday evenings and woke us up every Sunday morning. One Tuesday Paul fetched a pair of shears from the garden shed and I feared the worst. But I thought quickly and said that I loved the sound of the bells and how glad I was that we lived so near to the church. Paul looked at me as though I were mad, but the shears were returned to the shed.

When the bells stopped that evening, I walked to the bottom of the garden and hid myself behind the hedge to watch the ringers leave the church. I saw Carter, leading them down the church path—probably to the pub—and my body started to shake at the sight of him. He had hardly changed. He still had the slicked-down hair I remembered so well—although it was grey now rather than black—and he'd put on weight. I watched him until he disappeared round the corner, then I hurried back into the house, taking deep breaths, trying to still my trembling hands. I made for the downstairs cloakroom, where I threw up, scared that Paul would hear me . . . but he didn't. I told him that I had been outside

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putting something in the bin and he seemed to believe me. I hated lying to him, but I had no choice.

From then on I made sure we stayed indoors on Tuesday evenings and the change of bedroom had dealt with the cockerel problem. After a couple of weeks I was becoming more confident that I could manage the situation. But being in Manton Worthy still made me nervous, and I woke up each morning dreading what the day ahead would bring. And yet I put on a smile for Paul's sake.

Paul had decided to spend less time in London and run the business from the Old Rectory. I offered to act as his PA—after all, we'd met when I'd started work as his secretary . . . just as he was becoming bored with his first wife. And doing my bit for the business gave me the perfect excuse not to go out.

But I suppose it was inevitable that I would meet someone from the village sooner or later, and one Monday morning, as I was getting dressed, the doorbell rang. I let Paul answer it while I stood hidden at the top of the stairs, peering down into the hallway to see if the caller's face and voice were familiar. Once I was sure that I had never seen the visitor before in my life, I walked down the stairs, smiling graciously, and invited her in. She introduced herself as Mandy Pettifer and she seemed nice enough in her way, although she wasn't really our type . . . all floral dress and flat sandals. But I knew that a contact on the outside might be useful.

I took her through into the lounge—or the drawing room, as Paul insisted on calling it—and offered her a coffee. This was my chance to discover the lie of the land. Who was who now and what was what in Manton Worthy.

Mandy was the chatty type. In fact, once you started her on the subject of the locals it was hard to shut her up. She'd lived in Manton Worthy for ten years and she was married to an IT consultant who worked abroad a lot. She taught part-time at a primary school in the nearby town of Ashburn, the local school having closed down years ago, and I guessed that she had come visiting because she was at a loose end in the school holidays. She was one of those people who'll tell you her life story before you can get a word in edgeways.

"I expect most people in the village have lived here for years," I said when she paused to take a sip of coffee.

She looked disappointed, as though she wanted me to reveal as much about myself as she had . . . but I wasn't playing that game.

"Actually the nice thing about Manton Worthy is that most of the people are newcomers like you and me." She leaned forward, as if she was about to tell some great secret. "To tell you the truth, I don't think most of the locals can afford the house prices. I know the people who used to have our cottage live in Ashburn now. In fact, I only know of one person who's lived here all her life, apart from some of the local farmers, of course."

"Who's that?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

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"Miss Downey: She lives next-door to me. She's in her seventies now but she used to teach in the village school when there was one."

"Nobody else?"

Mandy shook her head.

"What about the bell ringers?"

Mandy looked surprised, as though she'd never considered that human beings rang the church bells. "I've no idea. Perhaps they come in from Ashburn. Most of the cottages were owned by a local estate and when they were sold off the tenants couldn't afford to buy at the prices they were asking. Most of them moved to the estate in Ashburn."

"And the cottages?"

"Bought as second homes or by people like us."

"So there's nobody apart from Miss Downey?"

Mandy laughed . . . a tinkling, irritating sound. "You'll have to meet her; she knows a lot about local history and all that. If you ever want to know what's gone on in Manton Worthy in the past, she's the person to ask."

I smiled but didn't answer. That afternoon I went for a walk through the village. It nestled in rolling, patchwork fields; chocolate-box pretty with its thatched cob cottages and ancient stone church next-door to the pub—everyone's ideal English village. Perhaps I had been wrong to be afraid. Perhaps everything would be okay . . . as long as I avoided Carter.

Over the next weeks I became bolder. I walked through the village—well away from Carter's land—and I even took Mandy up on her invitation to call round anytime for a coffee. Perhaps I needed to see someone other than Paul. Or perhaps I just felt I needed to know what was going on in the outside world.

One afternoon I found myself sitting in Mandy's front room overlooking the main village street. She had done it up nicely, I'll give her that. There was an old-fashioned inglenook fireplace and she'd taken up the carpet to reveal the original stone floor which she had promptly covered up again with a large abstract rug in shades of grey. There was a whiff of minimalism in the air, which surprised me as Mandy hadn't seemed the type for that sort of thing. She talked at length about interior design . . . and I listened. She had gone for a fusion of old rustic and modern, she said. I nodded and let her rabbit on. But I had more important things to worry about.

She mentioned the murder just as I had bitten into a Danish pastry. I felt myself choking and grabbed at the mug of coffee. By the time Mandy had fetched me a glass of water from her new beech kitchen with its slate-tiled floor, I had composed myself, although my heart was still pounding against my ribs. Who could have thought that the mere mention of it would bring back all the old terrors? But Mandy can't have noticed anything was wrong because she kept on talking, telling me how the girl had been

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found up by the woods, on the site of the old gallows. She'd been strangled, Mandy told me, enjoying every detail of the story. Strangled with a bell rope from the church. The police knew who'd done it, of course, but they could never prove anything. The boy had had learning difficulties and his mother had given him an alibi.

I asked her where she'd heard all this and she tapped the side of her nose. "A woman I work with used to live here. She told me."

"Did she mention Mr. Carter who has the farm next-door to us?" I regretted the question as soon as I'd asked it. But Carter was on my mind. In fact, if Paul knew how scared I was of Carter, he'd have done something about it, so I kept quiet. Trouble was the last thing I wanted in Manton Worthy.

Mandy looked puzzled. "No, I don't think she did. I can ask her about him if you like." She leaned forward, eager to please. She reminded me of a dog we had once owned, a stupid animal who was all enthusiasm and no sense. It had been put down and we'd buried it in the back garden.

"No. It's okay. It's not important." I hoped she couldn't sense the fear in my voice.

We got through three cups of coffee before I looked at my watch and realised how late it was getting. Paul would start to worry if I wasn't home soon. Perhaps it was the age gap between us that made him treat me like a child sometimes. Mandy tried to persuade me to stay—she was probably lonely there in that cottage, that cage of rustic minimalist chic, with her husband away so much—but I had to get away. She was beginning to get on my nerves.

Now that I knew the village was full of incomers like myself I felt more comfortable walking back. But as I hurried back down the main street towards the Old Rectory I heard a voice behind me.

"Karen? It is Karen, isn't it?"

I stood there frozen to the spot for a few seconds before I took a deep, calming breath and turned round. I tried to smile but I felt my mouth forming into an expression more of pain than pleasure.

The woman was small, bent with age. Her hair was snowy white and her flesh looked like thin parchment stretched over the bones. But her sharp eyes hinted at an agile brain behind that mask of age. I heard myself saying, "Sorry, you've made a mistake. My name's Petra."

But the woman's bright grey eyes were focussed on mine like searchlights. She hesitated, a knowing smile playing on her lips. "I'm so sorry, my dear, you just reminded me of one of my old pupils. I'm Edith Downey. I live in Beech Cottage . ... just over there." She waved a gnarled finger in the vague direction of a row of thatched, pastel-painted cottages straight off a picture postcard. I shuffled my feet, anxious to get away. "So you've moved here recently?"

"Yes." She looked at me expectantly. She wanted more. "We've moved into the Old Rectory . . . me and my husband . . . Paul.

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We've come from London." I tried to smile but I don't think I quite managed it.

Miss Downey took a step closer. Her eyes were still on mine, as though she were reading my thoughts. "It's all new people now . . . apart from the Carters and myself. I taught at the village school . . . when there was a village school."

"Really." I tried to sound interested but I felt the adrenalin pumping around my body as I prepared for flight.

"Have you been to the church yet?"

I shook my head.

"It's worth seeing. It has a medieval screen with some fine angel carvings. Some of the people who used to live here still come for Sunday service . . . most of them live in Ashburn now but they still feel they have ties here."

There was a hint of recrimination in her voice; a subtle criticism, as though she was hinting that I was personally responsible for driving up the village house prices and evicting people from their homes. But I said nothing. I wanted the encounter to be over. I wanted to get back to Paul.

I remember running back to the Old Rectory as though the hounds of hell were after me. I sank three large gin and tonics before I began the supper. Paul was busy in his office so I don't think he noticed.

It was awhile before I summoned up the courage to walk through the village again. I made excuses to myself: I had to use my new Range Rover because I wanted to do some shopping in Exeter or visit a supermarket ten miles away . . . I didn't dare risk the one at Ashburn. I was making any excuse not to walk past Miss Downey's cottage. But how could I avoid the woman forever?

Somehow I had to persuade Paul that moving to Manton Worthy had been a mistake. But as I wondered how to go about it, I carried on day after day, driving through the village in the Range Rover wearing my dark glasses. The days passed, and before I knew it the lanes were filled with farm vehicles and the fields hummed day and night with the noise of combine harvesters. When Paul complained, as I knew he would, I took my chance and said that farms were noisy places and we might be better off somewhere else. But he was determined to stay put. Once Paul had made a decision, he would never admit he was wrong.

Soon after that a leaflet came through the door. It was an invitation to the church's harvest festival, followed by a hot-pot supper in the church hall. Naturally I threw it straight in the bin and I had the shock of my life when Paul found it there and said he wanted to go. He said he'd decided it was about time we became part of the community. My mouth went dry and my hands began to shake. This was the last thing I wanted.

I was thinking how to talk Paul out of it when I went out into the hall and found the note lying on the doormat.

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"Miss Downey was knocked down and killed on Wednesday night . . . hit-and-run driver." Mandy leaned forward, anxious to share this juicy piece of gossip.

"That's awful," I said. "Have the police any idea who . . . ?"

"Well, I've heard that an old Land Rover was seen speeding around the village earlier that evening. Someone said the police have questioned Mr. Carter, who has the farm next-door to you . . . it's said he often takes his Land Rover to the Wagon and Horses. These country people sometimes think they're above the law where drunk driving is concerned, you know."

"So they think it was Carter?"

Mandy shrugged. After virtually accusing the man, she couldn't bring herself to deliver the final verdict. She leaned forward confidentially. "Remember I told you about that murder . . . the girl who was found strangled? Well, I asked about it and apparently she was Carter's daughter . . . and he was questioned about it at the time."

"Was he?" I felt my hands shaking.

"There were rumours going round that he was abusing her, but the police never found any evidence . . . that's what I was told anyway. Don't repeat it, will you?"

"No." I could hear my heart beating. "Of course I won't." I hesitated. "What happened to the boy the police suspected?"

"I think his family left the area. Why?"

"No reason," I said, as casually as I could manage. "Just curious."

I stood up. I wanted Mandy to go. I wasn't in the mood for company. I was wondering how to stop Paul from going to the harvest supper . . . how I was going to keep him away from Carter. But then I realised that I didn't have to go with him. I could develop a strategic headache. As long as I didn't come face-to-face with Carter and the nightmares of my childhood, I'd be all right.

"You're shaking. What's the matter?" Mandy's voice was all concern.

"Nothing." I tried to smile.

It was half an hour before she left and as she was leaving she asked me if I was going to Miss Downey's funeral. I said no. After all, I didn't know the woman.

As soon as she'd gone I rushed upstairs and opened my underwear drawer. I felt underneath the layers of flimsy lace for the note, and when I found it I took it out and read it.

Dear Karen,

I've been thinking about our meeting the week before last and I've been wondering what to do for the best. I do understand your feelings but I think it would be helpful to talk. Perhaps you would call on me one day for tea.

Yours sincerely,
Edith Downey

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I tore it into tiny pieces and put it down the waste disposal unit in the kitchen. I was stupid to have kept it, but I vowed not to make any more mistakes. That evening I told Paul that I wanted to go back to London but his response was that it was still early days . . . and the harvest supper was just what I needed to get to know people.

The next day I heard from Mandy that Carter had been released without charge.

I lived in a strange state of limbo for a week, pretending to Paul that I was looking forward to the harvest supper . . . and all the time making plans to avoid it at all costs. The most worrying thing was that Paul seemed to have reached some understanding with Carter. He had taken to visiting the Wagon and Horses some evenings and one night when he returned, he said that he had been talking to Carter and he seemed all right, really: You couldn't always judge by first impressions.

The change in Paul shocked me: He claimed that the slow pace of country life was lowering his blood pressure and making him feel calmer. Why run around like a headless chicken in London when you could enjoy the simple pleasures of a small community and open spaces? Paul seemed hooked and, like converts the world over, he began to enter into his new enthusiasm with a gusto lacking in the born-and-bred countryman. He talked of learning to ride, maybe joining the local hunt. To my horror, he even suggested inviting Carter round for lunch one Sunday as he was on his own, an idea which sent me straight to the bathroom to throw up.

Paul was going native and with every new development I became more and more certain that I had to get back to the city . . . any city . . . anywhere away from Manton Worthy. I had to get out before it was too late.

On the night of the harvest supper I developed a headache as planned and told Paul to go on his own. He looked disappointed, like a kicked puppy, but I had no choice. After some persuasion he went, and once I was alone I locked all the doors and settled down to an evening by the telly with some interior design magazines—I wanted to do something with the en suite bathroom so I found myself a pair of scissors to cut out any pictures that might provide me with some inspiration. I opened a bottle of Chardonnay, too—I needed something to steady my nerves.

At half-past nine it was pitch dark outside. Darkness in the countryside is nothing like darkness in the city and I could see nothing outside the windows, as though someone had hung black velvet drapes on the other side of the glass. But with the curtains drawn and the telly on I felt cosy and safe. Until I heard the noise of our polished brass doorknocker being raised and lowered three times.

I froze. The telly still babbled on, oblivious to the crisis, as three

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more knocks came. Then another three. I went through all the possibilities in my mind. Could Paul have forgotten his key? Could Mandy be calling to see how I was? I crept along the hall in the darkness, making for the front door. There were no windows in the door but the TV executive had installed a spyhole and security lights. I stood on tiptoe to look through the spyhole, but although the front step was flooded with halogen light, there seemed to be nobody there.

I was about to return to the safe warmth of the lounge when the knocking began again. My body started to shake and I tried to peer out of the spyhole but again there seemed to be nobody there.

I know now that I shouldn't have opened the door, but it was an automatic reaction—and I suppose I assumed that I could just close it against any danger if the worst happened. But things are rarely that straightforward. As soon as I had turned the latch, the door burst open and I fell backwards. I think I screamed. I think I tried to lash out. But it was useless. It was dark in the hallway and I could see very little, but I felt strong arms dragging me towards the lounge. I tried to kick, but it was as though I was caught in a web like a fly . . . at the mercy of some monstrous, unseen spider. I screamed again, but then I realised that this was the countryside. There was nobody there to hear me.

We were in the lounge now and Carter was bundling me onto the sofa. I could smell his waxed jacket as he held me . . . the same smell I remembered from all those years ago. And I could see his face . . . full of hatred.

"I saw you." He spat the words like venom. "I saw you run her over."

I tried to wriggle free, but he held me tight.

"But you were too late. She'd told me already that you were back."

"I don't know what you're talking about." The words came out as a squeak, unconvincing even to myself.

"Miss Downey, that's what I'm talking about. I got talking to that husband of yours. Funny how you didn't tell him much about yourself. He's no idea, has he?"

I felt his breath on my face and I tried to push him away. But it was no use. He was stronger than me.

"Why, Karen?" he hissed, putting his face close to mine. "Just tell me why. What had she ever done to you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"My Jenny . . . why?"

"Luke Fisher killed Jenny. Everyone knew that."

His hands began to tighten around my neck. "Once you'd gone, Luke told the police what he saw. They didn't believe him—just because he wasn't all there they thought he was making it up. But I knew he was telling the truth. You were always a sly little bitch . . . a bully. You made my Jenny's life a misery. No wonder your mam and dad moved away so bloody quick after she died. Did they

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know, eh? Always looked so bloody innocent, didn't you . . . face like one of them angels in the church. Did they know what you were really like? Did they know what you'd done?"

With an almighty effort I pushed him off and sprang up. I don't remember much about what happened next. Only that there was a lot of blood and I felt that same strange detachment I'd felt after I had killed Jenny Carter . . . when I looked down and saw her dead, bulging eyes staring up at me.

The memory returned like a tidal wave, everything that had happened that day all those years ago. The bell ropes in the church had been replaced and the old ones had been left lying in the back pew, perfect for the game I'd made up . . . the game of dare. I dared Jenny Carter to go to the old gallows and put the rope around her neck. Luke followed us: He was hard to get rid of . . . older than us, big and soft and too simple to know when he wasn't wanted. But I hadn't known he was watching when I tightened the rope around Jenny's neck, just to see what it would be like to kill somebody . . . to have the power of life and death. Once I'd started pulling on that rope I couldn't stop. I'd watched, fascinated, as her face began to contort and her eyes started to bulge. I was all-powerful, the angel of death; just like the angels on the screen in the church . . . only different. As I stood over the body of Jenny's father, I felt the same elation . . . the same thrill. But when I heard a voice calling in the hall the feeling disappeared and my brain began to work quickly.

I began to sob and I sank to the floor. The scissors I'd grabbed from the coffee table were in my hand and I threw them to one side. I was shaking and crying hysterically by the time Paul entered the room. And when he took me in his arms I slumped against him in a dead faint.

I pretended to be unconscious when the doctor and the police arrived. I thought it was best. And when I came round, in my own good time, I told my story in a weak voice. Carter had arrived and pushed his way in, then he had tried to . . . I hesitated at this point for maximum effect, but the policewoman with the sympathetic eyes knew just what I meant. Women alone in the countryside were so vulnerable and hard-drinking men like Carter, sensing weakness, knowing a woman would be alone . . . She was the sort of woman who believes all men are potential rapists and she believed every word I said. I was the victim, she said, and I mustn't feel guilty. I never liked to tell her that I didn't.

We left Manton Worthy soon after, of course, and made a tidy profit on the Old Rectory, which we sold to a city broker who wanted it for a weekend retreat. I told Paul that I couldn't bear to stay there after what had happened and he was very sympathetic: He even blamed himself for getting too pally with Carter. The day before we left I wandered into the church and I looked at the angel on the screen, the one with the sword, and I couldn't help smiling. I was

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Manton Worthy's angel of death . . . and nobody would ever know.

Once we were back in London I resumed my old life. I was Petra, Paul's wife; a lady who lunched and did very little else. Karen was dead.

It was six months later when Paul was found dead at the foot of the stairs in his office. He'd been working late and I'd been at the gym, working out with Karl, my personal trainer. Of course, when I say working out, I use the term loosely: What we were doing had very little to do with exercise bikes and weights. Karl had a girlfriend, but I wasn't worried about that: He was just a bit of fun, a way of passing the time . . . and Paul would never get to know.

The policeman who came to tell me about Paul's death wasn't very sympathetic. He questioned me for hours about where I'd been and about my relationship with Paul. I said nothing about Karl, of course. And when he asked me how much I stood to inherit on Paul's death, I told him the truth. Five and a half million, give or take a few quid. Of course I'd assumed that Paul's death was an accident, cut and dried. But it just shows you how wrong you can be.

The police said that Paul hadn't fallen; there were signs of a struggle and fibres from my coat were found under one of his fingernails. I told the police that he'd caught his nail on my coat that morning. And I told them he had some pretty dodgy business associates . . . he'd even moved to Devon once to get away from them. But they wouldn't listen, and when they charged me with Paul's murder even Karl turned his back on me and refused to give me an alibi because he was scared of his cow of a girlfriend.

I was convinced it would never come to trial. After all, I hadn't done anything. But every time I tried to convince the police of my innocence, they wouldn't listen. My defence barrister told the court how six months ago I'd been the victim of an attempted rape, but even that didn't seem to earn me much sympathy. The jury was full of brain-dead idiots who found me guilty by a majority of ten to two, and as the police bundled me past the crowds waiting outside the Old Bailey, someone flung a coat over my head and pushed me into a van that smelled of unwashed bodies and urine.

Even when they took the coat off my head the windows in the van were too high to see out of and I couldn't tell where we were or what direction we were driving in. We seemed to drive for hours on a fast, straight road, then we slowed down and the roads started to wind.

I asked the sour-faced woman I was handcuffed to where we were going and she turned to me and smiled, as though she was enjoying some private joke.

"Oh, you're going to Gampton Prison. You'll like it there. It's in the country . . . right in the middle of nowhere."

When she started to laugh I screamed and banged on the side of the prison van until my hands were sore. ●

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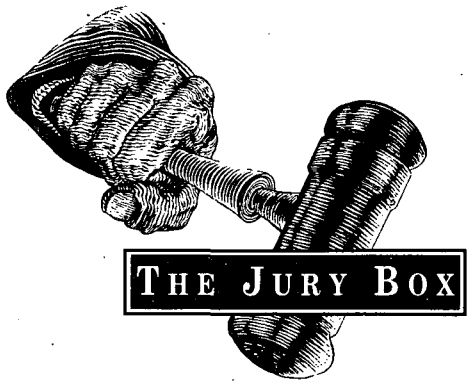

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Washington Post critic Patrick Anderson has written a survey of recent bestselling crime fiction, *The Triumph of the Thriller: How Cops, Crooks, and Cannibals Captured Popular Fiction* (Random House, $24.95). While his knowledge of mystery history seems spotty and I question his implication that the best of crime fiction present is artistically superior to the best of crime fiction past, he writes engagingly about such estimable contemporaries as Michael Connelly, Sue Grafton, Scott Turow, and George P. Pelecanos, among many others. The emphasis is American, but a few British writers are discussed, notably Scotland's Ian Rankin, the creator of maverick cop John Rebus, one of the great characters in contemporary crime fiction now twenty years on the job. Increased length, a broad canvas, a multitude of apparently unconnected cases, and an emphasis on the personal lives of the cops are not always happy trends in the hands of lesser writers, but Rankin is a master. ***** Ian Rankin: *The Naming of the Dead,* Little, Brown, $24.99. In 2005 Edinburgh, the G8 economic summit and associated demonstrations complicate life for Rebus, now approaching retirement age and mourning the death of a brother, and his colleague Siobhan Clarke, whose aging hippie parents have traveled north to join the protests. A Scottish Member of Parliament has died by fall, jump, or push from Edinburgh Castle, and a serial killer has apparently used a weird shrine to witchcraft and superstition called a Clootie Well to link three seemingly unrelated crimes. One of the best mystery plots in recent memory accompanies a detailed and harrowing account of the historic events attending the summit, peopled by a wide range of vividly drawn characters.

**** Dick Lochte: *Croaked!,* Five Star $25.95. In 1965 Los Angeles, young Harry Trauble works on his potential best-selling novel *Child of the Gap* while writing advertising and promo-

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tion copy for *Ogle,* a high-class girly magazine second only to that one in Chicago with the rabbit. In a workplace whodunit somewhat in the mode of Dorothy L. Sayers's *Murder Must Advertise,* the circulation director dies when a sculpture of the magazine's trademark frog falls on his head. Lochte's satirical eye captures the period flawlessly, and there's even a broad clue to the surprising murderer.

**** Margaret Frazer: *The Traitor's Tale,* Berkley, $24.95. In 1450 England, nun-detective Sister Frevisse and Simon Joliffe, actor-turned-intelligence-agent for the Duke of York, join forces to solve a series of murders possibly connected to a plot against King Henry VI. A richly detailed mix of political, social, and domestic history is balanced by nimble plotting, strong characterization, humor, and lively give and take. Both prose and dialogue avoid archaism and stiltedness without seeming anachronistic.

*** Lee Goldberg: *Mr. Monk and the Blue Flu,* Signet, $6.99. When San Francisco police engage in a sick-out to protest the mayor's budget cuts, TV's obsessive-compulsive homicide consultant Adrian Monk returns to official police work and confronts a variety of cases (serial killings of female joggers by a shoe fetishist, a murdered astrologer, and others, some connected and some not), aided by minder and Watson-narrator Natalie Teeger and a trio of comically impaired ex-cops. At least two chapters could stand alone as short stories. This is a very funny and inventively plotted book, and you don't have to be a fan of the TV show (created by Andy Breckman) to enjoy it.

*** Deborah Donnelly: *Bride and Doom,* Dell, $6.99. Wedding planner Carnegie Kincaid's latest murder-interrupted assignment involves the nuptials of a baseball slugger for the fictitious Seattle Navigators and a Goth rocker known professionally as Honeysuckle Hell. She also has her own coming marriage to worry about in a strong entry from a consistently good serio-comic series. Many will spot the murderer, either through veteran whodunit reader's instincts or some commendably fair clues.

*** Robert B. Parker: *Edenville Owls,* Sleuth Philomel, $17.99. In 1946 Massachusetts, eighth-grader Bobby Murphy prepares his coachless basketball team for a state tournament and tries to save his admired teacher from a mysterious threat. The author's first young-adult novel, aimed at readers 12 and up, is a juvenile equivalent of a Spenser caper, including noble hero in embryo, simple straightahead plot, and wise and supportive adolescent Susan Silverman figure, clearly a tribute to Parker's wife of fifty years. Some elements might appeal more to adults than to the target audience, who could use more context for pop-culture references familiar and nostalgic to Parker's contemporaries.

(continued page 75)

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LEOPOLD UNDERCOVER

by Edward D. Hoch

Here's an Ed Hoch character who hasn't been seen for a while: Leopold—retired police captain of a city modeled on his author's native Rochester, New York. It was a Leopold story that won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Short Story in 1968. After more than forty years in print, the character is as appealing as ever with his unflappable demeanor in the face of any danger. ¶

"I'm a bit old to be going undercover," Leopold told Captain Fletcher on an April afternoon when the city was finally beginning to waken to the promise of spring and the coming of Easter.

"That's the reason you'd be perfect for it," Fletcher told him, seated behind his new desk in a redesigned squad room that was a far cry from the workplace Leopold remembered. The entire headquarters building had been remodeled to make room for the vastly improved forensics lab, and even after several visits it still seemed foreign to Leopold.

"That and the fact that you couldn't send anyone from the department because it's outside your jurisdiction."

Fletcher smiled slightly, and for a moment he seemed like his old self, when he'd worked under Leopold as part of the team. "We want this man," he said. "Rosco Wein is behind much of the drug trade on the St. Lawrence Reservation."

"Which is way, way out of your jurisdiction."

"I'm not asking you to investigate him or arrest him. I'm just asking you to somehow lure him to the American side with drugs in his possession." He opened the file on his desk and passed two photos to Leopold. One was an obvious mug shot of a middle-aged man with a small tattoo or birthmark on his left cheek. He wore thick glasses and had shaggy black hair. The other photo, which seemed more recent, showed him laughing out of the side of his mouth, perhaps a little drunk. The picture seemed to have been cropped and enlarged from a group photo at a party of some sort.

"Is he Native American?" Leopold asked.

"He claims to be part Seneca, but we suspect it's a ruse so he'll be accepted on the St. Lawrence Reservation. As you know, the place straddles the line between Ontario Province and New York

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State. It's virtually impossible to stop the traffic in drugs and handguns between the countries. Rosco Wein brings cocaine and handguns into Canada and in return gets high-grade pot and Ecstasy that's distributed throughout New York and New England. A good portion of it comes right here to our city."

"Can't the customs agents set up roadblocks?"

"There's a quite profitable casino on the reservation that brings heavy traffic, especially on holidays and weekends. It's been a bit slow during the winter because the weather can be fierce up there. But now the traffic is increasing again and Wein has been active. The state police and reservation police are ready to make an arrest if he comes across to the American side with drugs in his possession. That's where you come in."

Leopold smiled at the thought of it. "I'm a bit old to be a pot customer."

"On the contrary. Older people with cancer or some other debilitating illness often turn to marijuana for relief. In California it's even legal with a doctor's prescription. Besides, I can't send one of my people up there. As you said, it's way out of my jurisdiction. And you'd have the additional advantage of using your own name if Wein wants to see identification."

Leopold picked up the photographs again. "Rosco Wein." He thought about it and finally agreed. "I'll take a ride up to their casino. I can't promise any more than that."

Molly wasn't pleased by the idea of Leopold making the four-hour drive to the casino by himself, even as a favor to Fletcher, but she was tied up with a trial and unable to accompany him. He started out early on the day after Easter, sticking with 87 North most of the way, past Albany and Saratoga and the eastern fringe of the Adirondacks. He could have taken it all the way to Montreal, but he left the highway near the Canadian border, heading west a bit to the St. Lawrence Indian Nation and its casino.

While the reservation itself extended into Canada, the casino was very much in New York State, not far from the highway. It was big and gaudy, similar to ones he'd visited in Connecticut and western New York. The slot machines, in all denominations, accepted only paper money, not coins, returning your balance or your winnings on a printed receipt if you chose to stop playing or move to a different machine. Leopold wasn't one to gamble much, and he moved on to the blackjack tables, where he quickly lost twenty dollars. He went up to one of the security guards and asked, "Is Rosco around today?"

"Who?"

"Rosco Wein."

"Haven't seen him. You might try the Homestead Bar. If he's on the res, that's where you'll find him at dinnertime."

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Yes, it was close to dinnertime and Leopold hadn't even realized it. Casinos had no clocks and he hadn't bothered to consult his watch. "They have good food there?" he asked.

The guard shrugged. "Good enough, unless you want to spend big bucks and eat here."

Leopold thanked him and left, asking the doorman for directions to the Homestead. It was about a mile away, and in his younger days he would have walked it with ease. Now he took the car. The Homestead was an old house converted into a restaurant and bar. It had a fair number of diners at six o'clock, and he guessed there was a Monday-night special on the menu. Somewhat surprisingly, a piano sat at one end of the dining area, covered by a clear plastic sheet. Leopold took a stool at the bar and ordered a beer. Presently a sandy-haired young man appeared and removed the cover from the piano. He placed an inverted top hat near his keyboard to accept tips and started playing a medley of old favorites. Occasionally he sang to his own accompaniment. Some of the customers were from the reservation, but most seemed to be casino patrons or drivers passing through on their way to Canada.

"Has Rosco Wein been around?" Leopold asked the bartender, not spotting anyone who resembled the photographs.

"Haven't seen him today," the bartender replied. "He travels back and forth a lot. His sister might know if he's away."

"Sister?" Leopold glanced around.

"The redhead over by the window. Name's Karen."

He ordered a beer, studying the woman who'd been pointed out to him. Wein's sister was probably in her late thirties and the red hair seemed likely to have been augmented. Still, she was an attractive woman who looked as if she'd be more at home in her shiny blue dress at the casino down the road. The man at the table with her, wearing a baseball cap and a leather jacket, had a flattened nose and Native American features. His brown eyes were deep and sleepy, the kind some women liked. Leopold guessed he was one of the reservation regulars. His left hand was beneath the table, no doubt resting on the woman's knee.

Finally he decided to give it a try. He wandered across the wooden floor with its squeaky planks and said, "I'm looking for Rosco Wein. The bartender says you're his sister."

She focused her blue eyes on Leopold with some difficulty and he had a suspicion she'd had more than the half-glass of beer in front of her. "I don't keep track of Rosco," she said. "He may be over on the Canadian side. I haven't seen him in a couple of days."

Her companion looked up, studying Leopold, apparently deciding he was too old to be a cop. "What you want him for?"

"Business."

"I'm Jay Silverspur. Maybe I can help you. Sit down."

He pulled out a vacant chair, ignoring the woman's frown.

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"Thanks. Can I buy you a round?"

"Sure." He glanced at the woman. "Karen?"

"Yeah. Another beer."

Silverspur shifted his gaze back to Leopold. "You come for the casino?"

"Among other things. I was up this way and I've heard that Rosco is a good man to contact for medication. I've got some health problems." He quickly outlined a manufactured medical history.

"If Rosco's not around, maybe I can help you."

"Well . . ." Leopold said with some hesitation.

"I can supply them at the less expensive Canadian price."

"That's what I was hoping for."

Karen Wein interrupted then. "Rosco can take care of you," she said. "I'll ring him on his cell phone."

The piano player had drifted into a Beatles medley and one middle-aged couple was making a try at dancing. Jay Silverspur frowned at Karen but said nothing as she punched a speed-dial number on her cell phone. "Rosco, this is Karen. I'm at the Homestead with Jay. . . . Yeah, I know. Look, there's a man here asking about medication. Jay says maybe he can help, but . . ." She glanced across at Leopold and said, "I don't think so, Rosco. He's a senior citizen, you know?"

Leopold tried to ignore both the telephone conversation and Silverspur's increasing displeasure. It seemed obvious that the two men were rivals in the same line of business. Finally Karen ended the conversation and snapped her cell phone shut. "He'll be here in an hour," she said.

Leopold nodded agreeably. "Might as well have something to eat while I'm waiting." He motioned to a waitress and ordered a strip steak.

After two more songs, the piano player took a break and came over to join them, taking the fourth chair. "You're good tonight," Karen told him.

He grinned. "I'm good every night." Glancing at Leopold, he asked, "Who's this?"

"He's waiting for my brother. Leopold, this is Sammy Bryson."

Bryson shook his hand with a firm grip. "Pleased to meet you."

"You do well on those Beatles tunes," Leopold said.

"Yeah, some of these kids have never heard them before."

"How late are you playing tonight?" Karen asked.

He shrugged. "I'm closing up. The bartender's new. I'll probably knock off around twelve-thirty. Not much doing late on Monday nights."

"Can I buy you a drink?" Leopold asked.

"Just a beer. I only take a fifteen-minute break."

"Is this your place?"

Bryson shook his head. "I wish it were. Like the casino and most

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everything else on the reservation, it's owned by Native Americans. This is one of Littlewolf's places, along with that gas station across the street."

"That's Dan Littlewolf," Karen clarified. "He has an interest in the casino, too."

Leopold's strip steak arrived, a bit rarer than he liked it, but the potatoes were good and he ate without comment. Sammy Bryson finished the beer and went back to his piano. When Karen Wein left them alone to visit the ladies' room, Silverspur said to Leopold, "I can give you a better price on drugs than Rosco could."

"Is that so?"

"You come to the res to buy drugs, you deal with me, not a fraud like Rosco. He's no Indian."

"I'll remember that," Leopold promised. "This time I'd better stick with him. I don't want trouble. But next time it'll be you."

Silverspur grunted as Karen returned to the table. Leopold could almost read his mind. He was thinking that this old guy with his health problems wouldn't last till next time.

"Here comes my brother now," she said as she took her seat. Leopold looked up to see a slender man with a black goatee who looked nothing like any Native American he'd ever seen. Though he was recognizable from the photos Fletcher had supplied, the goatee was certainly not Native American. It was little wonder that Silverspur rejected the guy, while remaining cozy with his sister.

"Are you Mr. Leopold, the one Karen told me about?" he asked. He sat down next to his sister.

"That's me."

Rosco Wein's eyes seemed to bore into Leopold's head. "You got some form of ID?"

"I'm not a cop, if that's what you think. I brought along my passport in case I had to cross the border."

Wein examined the passport and handed it back. "Can't be too careful. What is it you want?"

Leopold repeated the story of his supposed illness. "I bought some pot at a clinic in California and that seemed to help the pain. But now I'm back here and I can't get it."

Wein nodded as if he'd heard the story before. "I can give you what you need, and more besides. In addition to pot, I have a small amount of coke and some Ecstasy pills. Ever tried 'em?"

"No. I've read about them."

"They're well named. You'll forget all your troubles."

"All right," Leopold agreed. "How much for all three?"

"Depends what you've got to spend. Suppose we go out to my car and talk it over."

"Fine by me." He was relieved to get away from Wein's sister and Silverspur's insistent sales pitch.

Wein's car was a black SUV with an American flag decal on the

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window next to one for St. Lawrence Indian Nation. Leopold slid into the front passenger seat and took out an envelope full of currency that Fletcher had given him to make the buy. Before he said a word, Wein ran his hands over Leopold's back and sides. "I have to make sure you're not wearing a wire."

"A what?" Leopold asked in all innocence.

"I don't want you recording our conversation. Understand?"

"Sure."

"How much cash is in there?"

"Enough."

The bearded man sighed. "Look, I have to know what we're talking about. A thousand dollars?"

"More, if you've got what I need."

"I can supply what you need."

"I have ten thousand," Leopold said softly, as if hesitant to speak the sum aloud.

"Say, I think you must have some sick friends back home besides yourself." He chuckled a bit, jotted down some figures on a pad, and tore off the sheet for Leopold. "This is what I can supply for ten grand. How's that sound?"

"Good."

"Let me have a look at the money."

Leopold opened the envelope and fanned out the bills for a quick inspection. "Satisfied?"

"Sure. Don't worry, I'm not going to steal it. I'll have the goods tomorrow morning and we can close the deal then."

"Where? What time?"

"I have to cross over to the other side for some of it. I can meet you in this parking lot at nine."

"Will the Homestead be open then?"

"No. They don't open till lunchtime."

Leopold wanted a busier place, where the state police could be close-by without attracting attention. "What about the casino parking lot?"

"I'm not on the best of terms with Dan Littlewolf. If his security men spotted me there they'd probably run me off. He doesn't bother with this place so much."

"All right, it'll have to be here, then. Nine tomorrow morning."

They shook hands and Rosco Wein said, "See you then. Bring your money."

Leopold went back to his motel and phoned Captain Fletcher. "I've made contact," he said. "Wein liked the color of our money. He's making the delivery at nine tomorrow morning, in the parking lot of the Homestead restaurant. I tried to shift him to the casino but it was no-go."

"Good work," Fletcher told him. "I have to contact Lieutenant

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Oaken of the tribal police and tell him, off the record, what we're doing. The state police will be ready to move in, too."

"Some of these tribal police could be on Wein's payroll," Leopold pointed out. "It wouldn't be the first time."

Fletcher sighed. "That's a chance we'll have to take. Are you armed?"

"Ankle holster, if I have time to reach it."

"Be careful, for God's sake! If anything happens to you, Molly would never forgive me."

"Neither would I."

Leopold phoned his wife next. "How's the trial going?"

"Wrapping up," she said, sounding tired. "I miss you."

"I'll be home tomorrow night if all goes well."

He slept soundly but woke early, well before the seven o'clock alarm he'd set. He showered and dressed, thankful that it wasn't snowing. April weather in northern New York could be uncertain and the morning's gray clouds promised nothing but trouble. But this Tuesday was different. By the time he'd grabbed a quick breakfast and headed for the meeting with Rosco Wein, the sun was trying to break through.

The Homestead parking lot was empty when he pulled in at ten to nine. A half-hour later Wein still hadn't appeared and he was beginning to feel uneasy. At ten o'clock he phoned Fletcher. "He's a no-show."

"You think he smelled a rat?"

"I don't know."

"Sit tight. I'll phone Lieutenant Oaken and get back to you."

Leopold waited another half-hour before his cell phone rang. "Oaken just called me back," Fletcher said. "He's located Wein's SUV in the casino parking lot. You'd better get over there."

"Right," Leopold said. Something had gone wrong, but he didn't know what.

At the casino he spotted the tribal police vehicle parked by one of the rows of cars. A uniformed officer stood talking to a white-haired man in a business suit. Both were Native Americans. The officer's uniform had lieutenant's bars on the shoulders. He turned as Leopold approached. "You're Mr. Leopold?"

"That's right. Lieutenant Oaken?"

"Pleasure to meet you," he said, extending his hand. "This is Dan Littlewolf, the casino owner."

Littlewolf was a short, stocky man, probably past fifty. He looked unhappy as he said, "I don't know what this is all about. If Rosco Wein is involved in anything illegal, I know nothing about it."

"Have you found him?" Leopold asked.

"Mr. Littlewolf has his security people searching the casino right now," Oaken said. "If he's in there, they'll find him."

Leopold glanced at the SUV. "Is it locked?"

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The officer nodded. "And there are no packages visible on the floor or seats."

"What are you looking for?" Littlewolf demanded. "Drugs? I run a legit business here, and show a good profit. I don't need Wein or anyone else peddling drugs on my premises."

Leopold waited till he'd finished and then asked, "You own the Homestead, too, don't you?"

"That's right. Something wrong there, too?"

"No. In fact I had dinner there last night. It's just that I was supposed to meet Wein in the parking lot at nine o'clock and he didn't show up."

Littlewolf shrugged. "I guess he found the casino more profitable. I'm sure my security people will find him at the roulette wheel or the blackjack table."

But that didn't happen. At noon Rosco Wein was still missing and Lieutenant Oaken requested that the state police join in the search. Leopold remained close to the lieutenant, hoping for some news he could pass on to Fletcher, but all through the afternoon there was nothing. "He seems to have left the reservation," Leopold said at last.

"Without his car? That's doubtful."

Late in the afternoon Littlewolf directed his men to break into the car and search it. There were no drugs, no weapons, no bloodstains, nothing.

Leopold tried phoning Karen Wein but she didn't answer on her home phone and he didn't have the number of her cell phone. He finally decided the best place to find her was the Homestead and he showed up there at the dinner hour. The place was almost empty and there was no sign of Sammy Bryson, though his piano was uncovered.

"Has Karen Wein been around?" Leopold asked the bartender.

"Haven't seen her. She might turn up later."

Leopold ordered a beer. "Let me see a menu, too," he said, thinking he should stick around for a while to see if Karen appeared. He decided on a veal cutlet. Presently Bryson came in, removed his coat, placed the top hat in position for tips, and sat down to play. He started with a jazz version of "Easter Parade," a couple of days late. Then he paused as if taking a break but Leopold heard a few faint notes of "Yankee Doodle" and the piano picked up on them, launching into a jazz version of that as well. Leopold had to admit the guy was good, and before dinner arrived he went over to drop a couple of dollars into the top hat. Bryson bowed in thanks and played a couple more songs before taking a break.

The veal cutlet was good. He was almost finished when the door opened and Jay Silverspur came in alone, heading for the same table he'd occupied with Karen the previous night. Leopold waited

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till he was seated, then picked up his beer and walked across the silent floor to join him. "Hello, Jay. Remember me?"

"Sure. It was just last night."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Not so long as you're buying the beer."

Leopold motioned to the bartender for two more. "Have you seen Karen Wein today? I've been looking for her."

"Her brother's gone off somewhere. She's probably with him."

"Where would that be?"

"Beats me. Over on the Canadian side, probably."

"I had an appointment with him this morning. He didn't keep it."

A slow smile formed on Silverspur's face. "So now I'm good enough for you."

"I didn't say that. I don't need anything from you."

"Are you so sure?" he asked with a sly wink.

Well, was he? Leopold decided to play along. "You said you could get drugs at the cheaper Canadian prices."

"The Canadian dollar's close to the American in value these days. You wouldn't save much on medication—that wasn't really what I had in mind. But maybe I could supply something you can't find at the corner drugstore."

"Maybe. I have medical problems—"

"I know. You told us last night. You want pot? I can get you the best grade of Canadian marijuana."

Leopold glanced nervously over his shoulder, as if fearful that someone might overhear their conversation. "Wein mentioned Ecstasy too. And some cocaine."

"I can supply it all."

"Could I get it tonight?"

"How much do you need?"

"I was going to pay Wein ten thousand."

"American or Canadian?"

"American."

"Sure, we can do business. What did he promise you?"

Leopold took the list from his pocket. "Here. But I feel odd about this. What if he comes back?"

"He's not coming back. The res is swarming with cops searching for him. He's probably way across the border where it's safer."

At the piano Bryson had started playing again, beginning with an old Cole Porter melody, "Don't Fence Me In." Leopold had been a teenager, just starting to date, when the song was popular back in the 'forties.

"He knows the old ones," Silverspur said. "Dan hired a trio that plays rock on weekends for the younger crowd."

"You know Littlewolf well?"

"Everyone knows Dan. He's our local success story. With the casino and this place, he's probably the wealthiest Injun in the state."

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"How'd he get enough money to open the casino? Drugs?"

Silverspur shook his head. "He's got backers. Maybe they're Mafia. I don't ask questions."

"How soon can you be back here with my order? It's a four-hour drive home for me."

"Maybe an hour, that soon enough?"

"Eight o'clock? I guess I could wait that long."

"See you then. Out in the parking lot."

"Fine." Leopold watched him go, then paid the check and went out to the car to call Lieutenant Oaken on his cell phone.

He was still sitting in his car at twenty minutes to eight, waiting for Silverspur's return, when he saw Karen Wein pull into the parking lot. It was growing dark but he recognized her at once and got out of his car. "Karen!" he called out.

She was half out of her car when she heard him. Immediately she was back in the driver's seat, slamming the door and turning the ignition. It had started to snow, big wet flakes that cut down visibility, but she'd certainly recognized him and was taking off. He went after her, trying to remember the last time he'd been involved in a car chase. This one didn't last long. At the next intersection she turned the wheel too sharply on the wet pavement and skidded off the road. Leopold pulled in behind her, blocking her escape.

He opened her door, confronting her in the near darkness. "Why'd you run away? I'm looking for your brother."

"I thought you were someone else. I don't know where Rosco is. I tried calling him but there's no answer."

"I have to tell you the tribal police are looking for him."

"I know that. They're all over the reservation, along with the state police."

"If you know where he is, you should tell him to come out of hiding."

"I have no idea where he is," she insisted.

"They found his car in the casino parking lot."

"They'd better ask Dan Littlewolf about that."

"Were the two of them on bad terms?"

"No, I don't know." She shook her head. "Please move your car so I can back out of here."

"Has your brother had previous run-ins with the police or government authorities?" he asked, remembering the mug shot.

"Nothing serious. He's a patriotic American. He obeys the laws, has a flag decal on his truck, a patriotic ring tone on his cell phone, for God's sake! What are they trying to do to him?"

He glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost eight. "I have to go. I have to meet Jay Silverspur in a few minutes."

"What for?"

"Nothing involving you."

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Leopold moved his car, but when Karen tried to back out, her wheels spun in the mud.

Time was running out for his meeting with Silverspur. "I'll drive you back. You can get the car later," he offered.

When they reached the Homestead parking lot he told her to lean down in the seat, out of sight. In the near darkness he didn't think Silverspur could see her.

He arrived right on time, pulling into the restaurant lot and parking next to Leopold. "You got the money?" he asked.

"Right here." Leopold produced his envelope and showed the currency.

Silverspur took a large bundle from his trunk and Leopold started to get out, to keep the man from seeing Karen bent down in the front seat. That was when she caught a glimpse of the pistol in his ankle holster. "He's a cop, Jay!" she shouted.

Silverspur froze in his tracks for an instant, hearing her voice but not knowing where it was coming from. Then his hand dipped beneath his leather jacket and Leopold rushed forward, knocking the man off balance. A police whistle sounded from the other side of the parking lot. Silverspur was on the ground, tugging to free a switchblade knife from his pocket, when Leopold kicked his hand and reached down for his own weapon. Karen Wein was out the other side of the car, breaking into a run, when Oaken grabbed her around the waist and handcuffed her.

"Let's take them into the bar," Leopold suggested when Silverspur and Karen were both in custody. "It's time we got to the bottom of this."

Sammy Bryson stopped in the middle of a song as they entered, and the bartender looked as if the place was being raided. Lieutenant Oaken was leading Karen Wein and Jay Silverspur, both in handcuffs, with two officers following. At the sight of them, most of the regular customers quickly paid for their drinks and departed. Leopold was about to start talking when Dan Littlewolf entered, looking unhappy.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"Police business," the lieutenant told him. "It doesn't concern you."

"I own this place, remember? Have you arrested these people?"

"Let him stay," Leopold advised.

Oaken nodded. "To answer your question, Mr. Littlewolf, we're arresting Jay here for possession of narcotics with intent to sell. Miss Wein is being held for questioning."

"What about her brother? Have you found him?"

"Not yet."

Leopold cleared his throat. "I believe I can shed some light on that."

"Who is this man?" Littlewolf demanded.

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"A private citizen who's been helping the authorities," Oaken told him, and that was enough to shut him up. He seated himself at a table with Silverspur and Karen. One of his uniformed officers stood behind them.

Dan Littlewolf hesitated in choosing a seat for himself, finally sharing the piano bench with Bryson. "All right, what have you got to say?" he challenged Leopold. "Have you found Rosco Wein?"

"I think so, yes," Leopold responded. "You see, the trouble with most criminals is that they don't read enough. They especially don't read Edgar Allan Poe."

"What's that got to do with my brother?" Karen asked.

"Could I borrow your cell phone for a moment?" he asked.

She couldn't reach it with her hands cuffed, but Oaken took it out of her jacket and passed it to Leopold. "Now what?"

"What's his speed-dial number? You called him last night."

"Sure, he's my brother. Punch number 2."

Leopold did it and then they heard the muffled sound—the first few notes of "Yankee Doodle," seeming to come from the floor beneath their feet, like the beating of the telltale heart in Poe's story.

Once again Sammy Bryson tried to cover the sound with his jazz piano, but this time he wasn't fast enough. It was Littlewolf himself who silenced his fingers on the keys. "Where is he? Down there?"

Leopold nodded. "Sammy told me he had to stay here last night to close up. Wein came back with his package for me and probably asked to hide it overnight. Sammy killed him for it."

The piano player's face had drained of all color. "That's not how it was! I asked for some coke and we had an argument. I hit him. My God, I didn't mean to kill him!"

"But he was dead and you had to hide the body somewhere. It was too risky to carry it out to your car. You wrapped it in the plastic piano cover, which was missing tonight, hoping that would help hide the odor. You pried up some of the loose floorboards and hid his body under them, then nailed them back in place. The old floor squeaked when I walked across to Karen's table last night, but it was silent when I walked to the same table tonight. You never thought to search the body for a cell phone, though. When Karen tried to phone him earlier this evening, you heard the first few notes of "Yankee Doodle"—the patriotic ring tone she'd mentioned to me. You quickly launched into a jazz version on your piano and covered it nicely so no one realized what they'd heard. That single act proved you knew he was under the floor. It told me you'd killed him, Sammy."

Leopold remained on the scene while they pried up the floorboards and removed the body. Recovering the victim's remains was something he'd done so many times before. It had always been part of the job. He'd have to phone Molly and tell her he wouldn't be home tonight after all. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

ROAD GAMBLE

by Scott William Carter

Whipping around the sharp bends, tires squealing on wet asphalt, Simon pushed his little Miata close to eighty. The wall of pine trees on both sides, as well as the black sky above, created a dark tunnel into the hills. He was thinking about making it to the coast before midnight, early enough to squeeze in a few hands with the late-night poker crowd at the casino, and he didn't see the motorcycle until he was almost on top of it. With no taillight, and with its rider clad in black, the bike emerged from the dreary gloom like a moth alighting on his windshield.

"Holy mother of—" he cried, stomping on his brakes.

The shoulder belt snapped taut against his chest. His car fishtailed, back tires screaming, front end coming inches from the bike's mud-caked license plate.

Up close, the Miata's headlights slashed through the rain and the dark, illuminating the man and his bike in vivid detail. The guy's glistening jacket bore a striking design: a white bear head in profile, glowing as if luminescent. It was the only thing on the rider that *wasn't* black; pants, boots, even the helmet melded with the stormy night, making the bear appear to hover over the road.

Simon didn't know much about motorcycles, but the bike was

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definitely too sleek and compact to be a Harley. It looked like it belonged on a racetrack, not a highway.

Heart pounding, Simon eased off the biker. He would have expected the commotion to startle the guy, maybe cause him to swerve, but the biker's only reaction was to turn his head halfway around, just far enough that Simon's headlights appeared on the helmet's mirrored faceplate like a pair of hot ember eyes. The guy looked for a moment, then turned back to the road.

Scott William Carter's stories have appeared in periodicals such as *Asimov's, Analog, Weird Tales,* and *Crimewave,* as well as in anthologies published by Pocket Books and DAW. He writes YA fantasy novels as well, and tells *EQMM* that he lives in Oregon with his "patient wife, two children, two indifferent cats, a faithful dog, and thousands of imaginary friends."

And dropped his speed down to thirty.

Son of a gun. Simon could understand the guy being pissed—Simon *had* nearly plowed over him—but going half the speed limit, even in these conditions, seemed petty.

The squeaking wipers struggled to keep the windshield clear. Dashboard fans roared out a steady stream of warm air. There were few opportunities to pass on Highway 18, but Simon knew there was a passing lane in a few miles. He'd driven this road so many times, every pothole and mile marker was burned in his memory. He'd wait a few minutes, give the guy a chance to cool down. He really wanted to get to that poker game—he was already imagining the rush of tossing in his first ante—but he didn't want to get into some kind of stupid road game. In these conditions, one of them could end up dead in a ditch.

As his heart slowed, he felt a pang of remorse. What if he had died out here? Tomorrow—Saturday—was Jana's second birthday. He could just imagine the look on her face as she sat on their crappy lima-bean couch in their mousetrap apartment—an apartment that should have been packed with children laughing and making noises with party favors, but instead would be empty and deathly quiet as her mother explained why Daddy wasn't coming home.

She was so young ... In a few years would she even remember him?

Guilt—it was the worst kind of feeling, a feeling Simon had come to dread because he knew it always lurked somewhere around the corner. The worst part, the absolute worst part, was that Tracy would know, if he died on this stretch of road at this time of night (when he was supposed to be hanging out at Steve's watching horror flicks) that he had broken his word.

Promising to give up gambling forever was the only way he had been able to keep her from leaving him.

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But what she didn't know couldn't hurt her. After all, he wasn't playing like last year when his losses forced them to file for bankruptcy. No, it was nothing like that. Just an occasional game here and there. For fun, really. Spare change he earned from his tips, money Tracy never saw. He'd never dip into his bank account again. He was in control now.

His radio, turned low, was losing its Rexton signal to static, and Simon clicked it off. When he did, he noticed his hand was shaking. Apparently the incident had gotten to him more than he thought it had. The biker went on puttering at thirty, the spray from his back tire misting in the beams from Simon's headlights. Not a single car passed from the other direction, but Simon knew the road was way too popular, even on nights like this, to chance passing with a double yellow.

Jana's birthday, he kept telling himself. *Jana's birthday.*

He honked his horn a few times, but the guy didn't react. A few minutes later, they crested a rise and rounded a bend, entering a brief downhill straight stretch. Ah, now here was the passing lane. The road opened up, the dotted white line appearing. Accelerating, Simon moved to the left. The biker stayed on the right and in a few seconds Simon was alongside him.

For just a moment, no more than a few seconds, Simon eased off the accelerator to look at the biker.

From the side, it was easier to get a good look. He was a big guy, not tall but broad, wide across the shoulders, thick in the middle. If he had a neck, Simon couldn't see it—his helmet sat right on his linebacker shoulders. His pants tucked snuggly into his boots, pulling tight around his bulging calves. His hands, covered with black leather gloves, were also huge. Clenching the handlebars, they made the bike seem undersized beneath him, like a toy.

Simon realized this guy didn't seem like a *guy* at all. He seemed more like the creature on the back of his jacket—a bear. He suddenly wished he could see the guy's face. Would he look like Grizzly Adams, hair all over the place? He chuckled at the thought.

As if sensing he was being mocked, the biker turned and looked. It was then that Simon realized he had made a terrible mistake, lingering like this; imagining the eyes staring at him from behind the face shield sent a chill up his spine. He did not know this man, had no idea where he was going or why, but he sensed that this was not somebody to mess with. This was not a man you stared at, not for five seconds, not even for one. He wasn't threatening in a Hell's Angel sort of way, all bravado and bullying. Most bikers acted tough because they didn't want to fight, hoping their image of toughness would be enough to scare you away. No, Simon got the feeling this guy didn't care about projecting an image of toughness.

He didn't need to act tough because he *was.*

As if he had just come face-to-face with a rattlesnake, Simon

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turned slowly toward the road, applying gentle pressure to the accelerator.

But as he accelerated, the biker also increased his speed. Forty-five miles an hour . . . Fifty . . . Fifty-five . . .

The end of the passing lane was coming up in a hurry. The guy stayed right there, across from his window. Simon didn't dare look, but he saw well enough with his peripheral vision that the guy was still looking at him.

A yellow sign warned of the end of the passing lane. Sixty . . . Sixty-five . . . Seventy . . . For Christ's sake, the guy would not back off. The dotted white line vanished, the two lanes merging into one. His heart racing, Simon punched the accelerator and his Miata jerked forward.

He hoped one last burst of speed would propel him past the biker, but the guy stayed neck and neck. Worse, the road brought them together like two canoes in a narrowing river, and soon the guy was so close to his passenger-side window that Simon couldn't help but look. There, beyond the rain-streaked glass, lost in all that black leather, was the shiny faceplate still looking straight at him.

Cursing, Simon hit his brakes.

The biker sped past. Immediately the guy started to slow down —dropping, dropping some more, forcing Simon to keep tapping the brakes, until they were all the way back down to thirty again.

"I don't believe this," Simon said aloud.

He honked his horn a few more times. Again, the guy puttered along, not once turning to look back at his follower. There wasn't another passing lane for at least ten miles. At this pace, the poker games would be shut down for the night by the time he got there.

Simon thought about taking his chances across the double yellow line, but as if in response to his thought, a pair of headlights emerged from the gloom and a van whipped past, rocking his car and spraying his windshield.

He laid on his horn, then gave the guy's back a double bird. Still nothing. Maybe the guy was deaf. He drummed his fingers on his steering wheel. He'd just have to bide his time. There was a place to pass in a few minutes, and if he had even a hint of open road, he'd go for it. Show this punk what real speed was all about.

But when he reached the area to pass, and started to make his move, the guy sped up again.

Totally unbelievable. The guy was determined to be an absolute prick. This went on for another ten minutes—slowing in the double yellows, speeding up in the passing areas—until finally Simon couldn't take it anymore. He was going to pass and damn the consequences. The jerk was on a motorcycle, for Christ's sake. He would have to back off or he'd end up flying over his handlebars.

The nachos and cheese he'd had an hour earlier now came back to haunt him; his stomach churned and gurgled. He'd need a bath-

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room before too long. He was halfway to the coast now, in one of the darker stretches; the dense forest on both sides crowded the twisting road, the branches reaching overhead, creating a canopy. They passed a wooden sign indicating they were in the Van Duzen National Forest. Simon knew that except for a rest stop and a campground, there wouldn't be any other sign of people for twenty miles.

At least the rain had lessened to a light drizzle, allowing him to turn down his wipers. He passed up a couple of opportunities to pass until he hit the spot he wanted—another downhill slope with a passing lane. Then he bore down on the gas. His quick move got him alongside his companion, but as expected, the biker matched him.

Simon clamped down on the steering wheel. He felt his pulse in his hands. They streaked down the hill, the forest a blur on both sides. The extra speed increased the moisture spattering his windshield, making the glass blurry for seconds at a time, but Simon didn't want to take his hands off the wheel to speed up the wipers.

They barreled along, his speedometer passing over seventy, then eighty, then ninety . . .

As his engine screamed, Simon held his breath. The dotted white line vanished. The road narrowed. The punk *still* wasn't backing off, and there was no way Simon was letting off the juice now. He took a quick glance at the biker and, with a chill, saw the guy look over at the same time.

The extra lane disappeared, and then the two of them shared a lane, Simon partially over the double yellow. A bend in the road loomed ahead, a wall of trees beyond it.

Knowing his Miata cornered well, he kept his speed high and squealed around the bend. The biker stayed right with him, leaning into the curve, his shoulder nearly touching Simon's passenger-side window. That's when a pair of headlights appeared.

Simon had only a second to react. The gap between the lights made him think the vehicle was a semi or a motor home, and he jerked his wheel to the right. He knew the biker was there, but he had no other choice. As the truck—and it was indeed a semi truck—rumbled past, shaking his little car with its wall of wind, the Miata bumped the motorcycle.

The guy swerved onto the shoulder and beyond, kicking up a shower of mud. Simon's momentum drifted him toward the shoulder, and for a second he thought he was going to hit the guy again, but the biker suddenly dropped behind. By then they had rounded the corner and Simon had the Miata under control.

He gasped for breath, finally remembering to breathe. Heart pounding in his ears, he roared up a hill in the storm, nothing but open road in front of him. The surge of adrenaline lit every one of his senses on fire. He'd done it. He'd actually done it. Glancing in his rearview mirror, he saw only blurry darkness behind him. The guy was gone. He must have pulled off, shaken up by the whole

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thing. Simon had actually proven the cooler customer.

"Hot damn," he said.

The glass splintered instantly into a spider web of cracks, the sound as loud as a gunshot. Simon yelped and ducked to the right, car swerving. He glanced up just in time to see a fist strike the window—a black leather fist wearing gleaming brass knuckles.

This time the glass gave way in the center, shards landing on Simon's lap. The wind roared in his ears. Wet air rushed into the car, smelling of pine and mud. Simon saw the outline of the biker outside the window, and seeing the shine of the leather through the broken glass suddenly made the guy more real—as if before he was merely a projection of Simon's tired mind, or a villain in a video game.

They neared the top of the hill. Leaning away from the window, Simon edged closer to the edge of the road, but the biker followed, punching the glass again. More glass went flying, and this time a piece struck him above his mouth.

Tasting blood on his lips, Simon hit the brakes, hoping his attacker would race by, but the guy slowed along with him. The fist came through the window again, and this time the burly hand struck him on the cheek. It was only a glancing blow, more leather than brass making contact, but it was still powerful enough to jerk his head to the right. Purple and red stars flashed in front of his eyes.

When his vision cleared, the Miata was halfway in the ditch. As it plowed over the uneven ground, the car trembled and shook. The side of his face throbbing, the skin around his left eye already swelling, Simon steered the car back onto the highway. The biker was there, but Simon wasn't going to get punched again. As they roared over the hill, the night a swirl of black and green around them, he let out a primal scream and swerved at the biker.

The guy was too fast. He moved even farther to the left. They banked around a gentle curve, and it was then that a white motor home emerged from the night like a whale surfacing from the depths of the ocean.

Just in time, Simon whipped the Miata back into his own lane. He cringed, expecting to hear a sickening crunch.

But there was no such sound.

After the motor home roared past, blaring its horn, there was the biker on the far left shoulder, keeping pace. He turned and looked at Simon.

Simon's stomach churned even worse—now he really needed a bathroom. As they hit another straight stretch, not a car in sight, the biker barreled across the lanes. Simon swerved back and forth, trying to keep his attacker at bay, but these feints didn't fool him. He turned along with Simon, and then deftly sidled up to him. Simon leaned away, expecting another blow, but this time the fist grabbed his steering wheel.

The brass knuckles, shiny with moisture, were still there. The

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leather glove was covered with hundreds of pin-sized holes. Simon had no idea what the guy was doing until the wheel moved to the right. Along this stretch, the pine trees grew awfully close to the road, and if he hit one of them at this speed . . .

Slamming on the brakes was the most obvious thing to do, and he almost did it, but then he had a flash of insight.

With his left hand, he grabbed the door handle and jerked the door open, putting his forearm behind it.

It worked better than he expected. The door struck the motorcycle's handlebars, sending them careening in the other direction. The biker obviously hadn't expected this move; he held onto the steering wheel a split second too long. His weight was going one way, his bike the other, and the bike began to tilt.

In the next instant the biker was gone. This time Simon *did* hear the sound of a wreck—a series of bangs and thuds. Swerving into the center of his lane, he glanced in his rearview mirror and saw, through the smear of black and gray, a flickering headlight in the middle of the road, receding behind him. Then he rounded the corner and was alone with the rain and the highway.

In addition to his throbbing cheek, his whole body was trembling. Nobody could survive a crash like that. He had killed a man. He had actually killed. Dear God . . . His life was over. Even if it was manslaughter, he'd go away for years. His wife . . . his daughter . . .

He tasted bile. He clamped his hand over his mouth, and only through force of will did he keep from throwing up in the car. He descended a slight hill and, with fortunate timing, saw the sign for the Van Duzen National Forest Campground—and then another: Rest Area—1 Mile Ahead. He'd stupidly left his cell phone at home, so a pay phone was his best bet.

He could make it to the rest area.

The rain sliced into his car, dampening his left arm. The highway widened, a lane appearing in the center for a turnoff to the left, for the campground, and another lane on the right, to the rest area. Still shaking, he turned to the right, slowing gently, turning into the gap in the trees.

He'd never been to this particular rest stop. He'd passed it lots of times, even a few times when he had to take a leak, but by the time he reached it the pull of the casino had always carried him the last twenty miles. But this time he couldn't wait, and he was glad when he entered the pothole-infested parking lot and saw no other cars. He didn't want anyone to see him in his present condition—or his smashed window. He still hadn't decided if he was going to go back and fess up to what he did.

His mind raced, trying to understand how it all had happened. He had just wanted to pass. He didn't even see what he had done wrong. Honked the horn a few times, maybe. Had that really been enough for the guy to want to kill him?

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The rest stop was a lonely place, a few chipped picnic tables and a drab concrete box in a small clearing carved out of the forest; the pine trees, with their long, slender trunks and thick green branches high above, loomed a few dozen feet beyond a grassy area like a wall of spears. A single lamp shed its pale yellow light on the area. As he parked in front of the little building, the rain turned into a fierce downpour, and it sounded so much louder when he turned off his engine.

He had killed a man.

Stomach clenching, he threw open the door and ran toward the building. The frigid rain instantly soaked his hair, cutting through his thin cotton shirt like icy needles. The wind whispered through the trees, stirring up the paper plates and cups on the ground near the overflowing garbage can. The phone booth was on the far side, near the women's door, but he couldn't wait. Dodging the puddles in the sidewalk, he sprinted to the green door marked Men. When he grabbed the cold metal handle, the door opened *(thank God, thank God)* and he sprinted inside.

The room was dank and cramped, smelling of piss and mold. A single amber light above the cracked mirror and the metal sink was the only thing keeping the darkness at bay. There were two urinals to the left of the sink, two green stalls immediately to the left of the urinals. Gritty tile floor, lots of small white squares streaked with mud. Shoebox-sized vents near the ceiling. Stumbling into the first stall, he took it all in with a glance.

He barely made it down to the bowl before the contents of his stomach surged out of his mouth. Again and again, he threw up, until there was nothing left but dry heaves and the horrible acid burn in his throat and his nose. He hugged the cold metal, his head bent into the bowl and all its foulness, sobbing now. The damp ground soaked through his pants and chilled his knees.

The restroom door swung open.

There was no creak, just the distinctive swoosh of the door and the increasing loudness of the rain. Simon froze. The stall door had shut behind him, but he knew whoever it was could see his knees. They would have seen his car. Might have seen the wreck. Maybe it was a policeman, already come to haul him away.

Simon didn't make a sound. The restroom door swung shut, muting the storm. Only a dripping faucet broke the silence. After a few seconds, he heard footsteps, water dripping on the tiles, the rustle of heavy clothing. He half expected his stall door to swing open, but instead he saw a glistening black boot appear on the ground, only inches from his knee. The mud-coated toe pointed in the direction of the urinal Simon knew was right next to the stall.

A black boot.

Simon's despair was quickly washed away by an all-consuming dread. His breath caught in his throat. It couldn't be. . . . The man

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could never have survived. It had to be someone else. *It had to be.*

As Simon remained absolutely rigid, he heard a zipper, then the tinkle of fluid hitting the metal urinal.

He felt himself relax slightly. It was just some traveler, stopping to relieve himself of his coffee. Maybe he hadn't even noticed Simon. If Simon just waited, maybe he would go away.

But then Simon felt a splash of warm liquid hitting his knee, and he realized, with a shock, that the man was pissing on him. With a startled cry, he scooted away from the line of piss, which continued splashing against the tiles. His heart thundered in his ears. The piss dribbled to a stop, and then he heard the zipper. He saw the boot turn, two boots appearing, both facing his direction.

Simon pressed his back against the other side of the stall, his body shaking. The boots didn't move for the longest time. Simon waited for a gloved fist to smash through the stall, right in the middle of all the *Johnny+Suzie* and *For a Good Time Call* messages scratched on the green metal. But instead, the boots turned away. As Simon sat rigid, waiting for his stall door to bang open, he heard the footsteps move away. The restroom door swung open.

Soon he heard nothing but the tinking faucet. Simon had no idea how long he knelt there, but it was a long time. Then, when he actually *wanted* to move, he found he couldn't. Would the biker be waiting outside? Or had it merely been a mistake, pissing on him like that? Maybe it wasn't the biker. Maybe . . .

The roar of an engine out in the parking lot made him jump. He knew the sound. It *was* the biker. He heard the screech of tires, and then the sound of the engine moving away. He breathed a sigh. The guy was just toying with him one last time.

He was going away. It was over.

Shakily, Simon rose. He flushed the toilet, washed his mouth in the sink, then used damp paper towels to wipe off the piss on his pants. Breathing a sigh, he pushed through the restroom door and out into the rain. He didn't mind the water drenching him—he wished he could be submerged in it, like jumping into the ocean. He walked toward the phone booth, and as he neared, he saw that the metal cord had actually been severed. Had the biker cut it? The rain suddenly felt colder, and he turned, taking a few cautious steps down the sidewalk toward his car.

Until that moment, he hadn't realized that he was holding his breath. He took several long, shuddering gulps of air, then continued on to his car. Why would the biker cut the cord? Unless . . .

That's when he heard a roar from the trees.

He stopped. At first, he thought it was an animal, a mountain lion or a black bear, and he turned in the sound's direction. It was coming from somewhere in the forest beyond the asphalt. Then he caught a glint of metal, and he saw a black shadow emerge from the darkness. A wheel appeared. Chrome. And then he saw the

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biker rolling out of the trees, like an apparition of death itself.

The rain created tiny white explosions on the blacktop between them. The biker, front tire poised at the curb, gunned his engine. His headlamp was smashed. Simon was halfway between his car and the restroom, and he knew this was exactly what the biker had wanted.

He broke into a run, heading for his Miata.

The biker gunned his engine, his back tire spitting up grass and dirt as he barreled into the parking lot.

Simon was only a few steps away from his car. He was going to make it. Remembering he had left the door unlocked in his haste, he grabbed the door handle and pulled.

But the door *was* locked.

He didn't understand. As the biker roared toward him, he fumbled for his key, but couldn't find it in either pocket. Then he remembered that he hadn't only left the door unlocked, he had left his key inside as well—and he realized, as he heard the sound of the biker's tires squealing, exactly who had it.

No . . . !

Sensing he had no time to turn, he jumped toward the front of his car. The biker, his back end swinging around as he banked into the turn, smashed into the driver's-side door. Simon landed on the pavement, scraping his hands, but he was up instantly and running.

He headed for the narrow line of trees separating the rest area from the highway. Through the darkness and the rain, he saw glimpses of the road, like a giant black serpent.

He would cross the road. Get to the campground on the other side. Find someone. It was his only chance.

He made it up over the sidewalk and onto the soggy grass, but then the roar was right behind him and something struck his shoulder. As he went sprawling, the biker thundered past, spinning around, his back tire carving a brown half-circle on the grass. Simon struggled to his feet, but a searing pain lanced through his right knee, and he collapsed onto the wet earth again.

He heard the engine die, the kickstand pop down. He raised his head to see the biker dismount. Simon rolled onto his back and scrambled backwards, the moisture soaking through the seat of his pants. Rain ran into his eyes, blurring his vision. The biker loomed over him like a black shadow. Gloves descended, grabbed his shirt, pulled him off the ground.

Blinking away the water in his eyes, he looked up at the faceplate inches from the end of his nose.

The black helmet now bore a jagged silver scratch on the right side. Simon tried to peer beyond the mirror, but he saw only his own face reflected back at him: his left eye purple and swollen, a line of blood dribbling from his bottom lip across his chin, his soaked hair plastered against his scalp. It was the face of a small and frightened man. It was the face of a man Simon didn't know.

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"Please," he begged. "Please . . . I have a wife . . . a daughter."

The biker's grip on his shirt tightened. For the longest time, he held Simon there, the faceplate so close Simon's breath fogged the glass. He got whiffs of motor oil and leather. The rain lessened, a gust of wind shaking the trees, starting as a whisper and ending as a low moan.

Finally, the biker released him. He fell hard on his backside, and looked up, too scared to move. The biker looked down at him another moment, then reached into his pocket and tossed a pair of keys between Simon's legs.

As if he was in a dream, Simon watched the man turn and walk back to his bike, a bike Simon now noticed was scratched, the fuselage dented, one of the handlebars twisted. He watched as the man started the engine and, without so much as a glance in Simon's direction, drove away.

Exhausted, Simon laid his head on the grass, listening as the roar of the biker's engine moved beyond the rest area, out into the road, and then blended with the storm. He lay there for a long time, then finally rose, retrieved his keys, and made his way back to his car.

As if he were floating outside his body, he watched as he put the key in the door, climbed inside, started the engine, and drove his car toward the exit. He thought the moisture on his face was rain until he tasted the tears on his lips.

With his car idling at the entrance to the highway, the road stretching into darkness on both sides, he knew he had a choice.

To the right lay the casino, where a group of strangers waited around a green felt table, the dimly lit room hazy with smoke. In his mind's eye he saw an empty chair, a stack of chips in front of it, five cards facedown. He saw himself sit, pick up the cards, and toss his ante into the pot. The pull was there. Even with his bloodied face and aching chest, he felt it. He wanted to go there. He wanted to join that table. There was still time. Nobody would care how he looked. *Nobody.*

But to the left, somewhere beyond the shadowy hill, he saw something else: his daughter's dark room, the street lamp in the parking lot breaking through the gaps in the blinds. It was as if he were standing there in the doorway, his clothes still dripping. The room smelled so much different than the casino—no smoke, but instead the faint stench from her soiled diapers, an odor her diaper pail couldn't quite contain. It didn't smell bad to him, though. It smelled wonderful. He saw himself move quietly into the room, navigating around dolls and blocks and board books littering the floor. He saw himself ease down in the glider across from her bed, cringing when it squeaked. He saw his trembling hand reach for her sleeping form, his fingers inches from her hair.

He closed his eyes. He saw her so much more vividly this way. If he concentrated, he could almost feel his fingers brushing against

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her hair. Soft, like the finest silk. If he thought about how it felt, if he didn't allow himself to think about anything else, not even for a second, the feeling could save him. He knew it could. It had power. All he had to do was surrender himself to it. All he had to do was turn his hands to the left.

It should be so simple.

It should be so easy.

And yet, as he opened his eyes, and with a last convulsive shudder forced the wheel to the left, he knew it was both the hardest and the greatest thing he had ever done. ●

The Jury Box (cont. from p. 51)

** Ruth Dudley Edwards: *Murdering Americans,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. Offering more right-wing cultural satire than mystery, Edwards has taken every embarrassing anecdote about the failures and excesses of American universities (political correctness, lowered standards, culturally illiterate students, grade inflation, liberal bias) and visited them on a single fictitious Indiana campus, where colorful series sleuth Baroness Troutbeck serves as Visiting Professor. Even those who don't share the political perspective may find at least some bits funny. The British author's take on American lingo isn't bad, but she has, like, no idea where the *likes* are properly placed in youth speech.

Two new anthologies will be of special interest to *EQMM* readers. *Passport to Crime* (Carroll & Graf, $16.95), edited by Janet Hutchings, gathers 26 stories from the magazine's regular feature of mysteries in translation, neatly bookended by Fred Kassak's droll contemporary variation on an Edgar Allan Poe classic, "Who's Afraid of Ed Garpo?", and Norizuki Rintaro's cleverly plotted Ellery Queen homage, "An Urban Legend Puzzle." While some of the writers have books available in English—e.g., Boris Akunin, Baantjer, Paul Halter—others, for all their award-winning accomplishments, still have not appeared in translation outside of "Passport to Crime," an addition to this magazine that surely would have Fred Dannay and Anthony Boucher smiling.

The latest collection from prolific editor Mike Ashley, *The Mammoth Book of Perfect Crimes and Impossible Mysteries* (Carroll & Graf, $14.95), has among its 29 entries six stories from *EQMM* (two by Edward D. Hoch), five from *AHMM,* and eight originals, including an entertaining (if not quite completely solved) Bat Masterson story—"The Hook" by Robert Randisi—and an excellent World War II-era locked-room mystery set on an Army base—"The Benning School for Boys" by Richard A. Lupoff. While Ashley has deliberately avoided much-reprinted icons of the miracle problem like Carr, Futrelle, Rawson, and Chesterton, he has included relatively unfamiliar tales by such present-day specialists as Bill Pronzini and Peter Tremayne, plus past masters like Joseph Commings, Vincent Cornier, Arthur Porges, C. Daly King, and Peter Godfrey.

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE WORLD BEHIND

by Chris F. Holm

It's hot. Too hot to sleep, I think, though the gentle rise and fall of the sheet as my wife slumbers beside me argues otherwise. I glance at the clock on the nightstand. It's not quite four A.M. The curtains flutter in the warm summer breeze, translucent and insubstantial by the pale glow of the street lamps. They're beautiful—one of a thousand tiny reminders that the world is as it should be.

Born in Syracuse, New York, Chris Holm is the grandson of a cop with a penchant for cop stories. Hardly surprising, then, that his debut fiction should be a mystery. He is also a scientist who currently manages a marine biology lab on the coast of Maine. He has recently completed his first novel, a supernatural thriller.

I kiss my wife gently on the cheek and slip out of bed. She smiles but doesn't stir. I pad down the hall past Maddy's room, pausing a moment to listen to the quiet sound of her breathing. Downstairs, I make myself a cup of tea and head for the porch, the screen door creaking in protest as I ease it closed. I'm greeted by the scents of dogwood and honeysuckle, and of fresh-cut grass sweet like hay—the scents of summer in Virginia.

It's been twenty years, I realize. Twenty years since the summer that changed my life forever. Sometimes, after the first hard frost has browned the leaves and the chill rains of winter are on their way, it seems a lifetime away. But on a night like this, when even the setting of the sun provides no relief from the oppressive Southern heat, it seems so close. Truth be told, I know it's never far away.

The summer of 1986 was one of the hottest on record. Drought had been declared in the city of Richmond, and sprinklers and hoses were forbidden. Though the air was thick with moisture and our clothes stuck heavy to our skin, the grass grew dry and brittle beneath our feet, and eventually grew not at all.

My family and I lived in a well-manicured house in a suburb at the edge of town, where the last tendrils of development stretched

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into the wild Virginia countryside beyond. At the end of the street was a turnaround, past which lay a dense thicket of brambles that gradually gave way to an old-growth forest of birch and oak. A single, winding path cut through the brambles into the forest beyond.

I'd often wondered where the path led, but I was a shy kid, bookish and afraid. In the end, it was that fear that drove me down it. I was certain then that I could hide. Now, of course, I know better.

It all started with the squirrel.

"Go on, *Timothy*, do it!"

Billy McMahon's eyes glinted with mischief. He knew damn well that nobody called me Timothy but my mother, and what's worse, so did everybody else there.

"No. I won't."

"What's the matter, *Timothy,* you too much of a pansy?" Billy's nostrils flared in animal aggression. Billy McMahon was a cruel child, the kind of cruel that made you mighty popular at that age. He had me on the ropes, and he wasn't about to let up. Not while he had an audience.

"Timothy's a pansy! Timothy's a pansy!" This from Mike Harrington, and in a whiny falsetto, no less. The kid lived in Billy's shadow. Honestly, living in Billy's shadow was one of the better moves he'd ever made. Mike was a little slow, and small for his age, and standing behind Billy McMahon was a sure-fire way of never ending up in front of him.

"I'm *not* a pansy," I said through gritted teeth. The crowd gathered tighter around us, humming with voyeuristic interest. I scanned their faces for an ally, but all I saw was relief that it was me in the hot seat and not any of them.

"Then touch it."

The squirrel lay dead on its side in the center of the street, one blank eye staring skyward. It looked to me like all it wanted was to be left alone. I knew how it felt.

"Fine," I replied. "Give me the stick."

"No stick for you, Timmy-my-boy. You gotta touch it barehanded. You're lucky I don't make you pick it up for being such a girl about it."

A voice cut through the rising din of the crowd. "Leave him *alone,* Billy."

The crowd parted. I couldn't help but wince. There, straddling her bike, was Alison Ashbrook, all elbows and scabby knees. Billy broke into the kind of grin that you feel in the pit of your stomach.

"You hear that, Timothy? Your *girlfriend* wants me to leave you alone."

"His *girlfriend,"* Harrington echoed in that same singsong falsetto.

I opened my mouth to reply, but all that came out was a dry croak.

"Hey, Billy," Alison said, nodding toward Mike, "tell your

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boyfriend he sounds like my little sister, only maybe not as cute. You think he's getting jealous you're paying Tim so much attention?"

Harrington went red and silent.

"You should watch your mouth, you little bitch," Billy replied, shaking with rage. The crowd had turned on him, laughing at his discomfort from the safety of a few feet away. Anonymity is a hell of a cure for cowardice.

"And you should watch *yours,*" she replied. "Every time you open it people get to see what kind of guy you really are."

Billy picked up his bike from where it lay on the street and climbed atop it. "C'mon, Mike," he said. "Let's bail. Too many losers around here for my taste. Oh, and Timothy? I'll see *you* around."

Mike collected his bike without a word, and they rode off, leaving a snickering crowd behind.

With Billy and Mike gone, the crowd began to disperse. I was grateful. My face was flushed with embarrassment, and tears welled in my eyes, threatening to spill over. Soon it was just me and Alison. She looked at me with an expression of sympathy. I looked at my shoes.

"Don't worry about those guys," she said. "They're more bark than bite. You okay?"

"Yeah," I said, turning away. "I'm fine."

"You wanna go get some ice cream or something?"

"Can't," I replied. Truth was, I couldn't stomach the thought of the looks we'd get, the whispers as we passed. *Timothy Hewitt, saved by a girl.*

"Oh. Another time, maybe."

"Yeah. Maybe." I started down the street, toward home. There was a flutter of playing cards against spokes as Alison turned her bike around to do the same. I took a breath and turned around.

"Hey, Alison?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

Alison flashed me a smile that almost made the day worthwhile, and then turned and rode off. I strolled home beneath a sky of deepening orange. I thought about Billy and Mike, and the price I'd pay for Alison's intervention. I thought about the squirrel, lying dead and bloated on the sun-bleached pavement. I thought about Alison, so quick and so fearless when I was clumsy and afraid.

But mostly, I just thought about her smile.

When I came down for breakfast the next morning, my father was sitting at the table, hidden behind his morning paper. A half-eaten plate of waffles sat in front of him. I sat down at the empty plate beside him as Mom fished another batch of waffles out of the toaster and set them down in front of me.

"You see this, Meg? Looks like another coupla animals went

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missing from the neighborhood again. Coyotes, they're saying. Says here the heat drives 'em out of the woods looking for food. They're telling folks to make sure to bring their pets in at night."

Mom said nothing. I concentrated on my breakfast. Dad continued from behind his paper, "Only I was talking to Mark Holbrook the other day, and *he* says that isn't so. His brother works over at Animal Control, and he says the ones they found were taken apart, but there wasn't anything *missing.* Way he tells it, no animal coulda done it. You ask me . . . "

"David," Mom replied sharply. "We do not need that kind of talk at the table." *At the table* is what she said. *In front of Timothy* is what she meant.

"What?" Dad glanced over the top of his paper. "Oh geez, kiddo, I didn't know you were up yet. I didn't mean anything by it. I'm sure Thurston's fine."

"That's okay," I mumbled. It wasn't, though. Thurston was our cat, a four-year-old tabby. Earlier that summer, she had wandered off. Nobody'd seen her in weeks. Mom insisted she was all right, that some nice family had taken her in, but I knew the truth. Thurston wasn't coming back.

"So," Mom said, "I was thinking you could ride your bike over to Ben's today if you like, maybe go for a swim? Ben's mom says she'd love to have you."

Ben's house was half a neighborhood away. The route took me right past Billy McMahon's house. "I don't feel like it," I said, pushing waffles around the plate.

"Well, I've got a house to show, and you can't just lie about all day. You're going to Ben's."

"Fine." I pushed back from the table, leaving behind a congealing mess of waffles and syrup. I threw my swim trunks and a towel in a bag and headed for the door. As the screen door clanged shut behind me, Mom called out.

"Timothy?"

"Yeah?"

"Be safe!"

Safe. Right. I grabbed my bike from the garage and rode off down the street.

The important thing was, I had a plan. Three blocks up to Forest, four blocks over to Cherry, and then back onto Oak. That's five blocks more than I needed to go, but it would be well worth it if it kept me away from Billy.

I was barely to the end of my street when I heard the call.

"Hey, Timothy, I got a present for ya!"

He'd been hidden behind a tree, waiting. In his hand was a tree branch. By the time I spotted him, he was less than an arm's-length away. He jammed the branch into my spokes. The bike

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jerked to a halt. I didn't.

I sailed over the handlebars. Palm-first onto the pavement. He was on me in a flash.

"You think I'm gonna let you make a fool outta me?" he asked, rolling me over with a nudge of his foot. "You think you and that girlfriend of yours are so smart?" He hit me. I didn't even try to stop him.

"I *asked* you a question." He hit me again. Tears spilled down my cheeks. "What'sa matter? *Cat* got your tongue?"

Behind us, I heard the slam of a door, and footsteps approaching. "Hey!" someone shouted. "Get off of him!"

Billy straightened. I didn't get up.

"What in hell do you think you're doing?"

"We're just having some fun," Billy said. "Ask him, he'll tell you."

"The hell you are." He glanced at my bike. Front wheel bent. Spokes snapped like twigs. "You could have killed him."

"I didn't mean nothin' by it."

"Sure you didn't. Only now you've got a problem. See, you so much as set foot on this street again, I'm calling the cops, you hear me? You don't come anywhere *near* him."

"Yeah, whatever."

"Don't shrug me off, *William.* Not unless you want me to take this up with your father."

Billy blanched.

"I thought so," the man replied. "Now's the time for you to leave."

Billy shot me a look of pure venom and took off down the street. The man turned his attention to me. "You all right?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"Tim, is it?"

"Yeah."

He extended a hand to help me up. I took it. "Name's Murray," he said. "Ryan Murray. I teach up at the high school. Had a couple of run-ins with William and his brothers last year. Not the friendliest bunch."

"Yeah."

"You know this isn't going to keep him from you forever."

"I know."

"You okay to make it home?" I nodded. "Okay, then. I suggest next time, you be prepared. Kids like him, there's always going to be a next time."

Next time, sure. He'd have to find me first.

The path stretched out before me, disappearing into the weeds. Narrow, but well-worn. I'd stood here dozens of times before, hundreds maybe, but today it looked different. Today, it looked *possible.*

After my run-in with Billy, I'd dragged my bike toward home, watching from behind a neighbor's bushes until my parents left

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for work. I stashed the bike in the garage, piling toys and junk atop it so my parents wouldn't see. Then I came back. To the path, and the safety it afforded. I was sure I could just melt into the forest and disappear. I had no idea how true that nearly was.

I took a breath and set out down the trail. It was scarcely wider than the shoeprints I left behind. Brambles dug at my clothes, my skin. The air was thick with dust and pollen. I pressed on, coughing.

As the canopy grew thicker overhead, the weeds began to dwindle. Eventually, they receded completely, the ground covered instead by a thick mat of leaves. It was cooler here by maybe ten degrees, and the air was fragrant with sap. Somewhere, in the distance, I could hear the trickle of running water. It was beautiful here, nothing at all like the orderly grid of suburban streets just a hundred yards away. This was something different. This was the world *behind* the world.

I wandered for hours, exploring every culvert and hill. I found a stream, and alongside it, an old, abandoned rail-line, so overgrown I might not have noticed it but for the broad swath of daylight that cut through the canopy above. I was dying to follow it, but the sky was tinged with red, and I knew before long it would be too dark to find my way. I headed home, resolving to come back tomorrow.

And come back I did, the next day, and the next one, and the one after that. Dealing with my parents was easy. Every morning, a different story—swimming at Ben's, dinner at the Mercers', kickball at the school with Steve. They were so happy I was getting out of the house they never bothered to question me, and anyway, I'd never lied to them before.

On the fourth day, I found the shack.

It was a squat, windowless structure maybe eight feet square, perched on the slope between the old train tracks and the stream. Its pitched roof was covered in moldering shingles, and its walls were boards of rough, unpainted wood, grayed with age. Sunlight shone through the gaps between them.

I approached it cautiously. There was no latch on the door, just empty space where a knob should be. I touched the door and it swung inward on its hinge. I stepped inside. The sudden darkness was a shock after the glaring afternoon sun, and it took my eyes a moment to adjust. Eventually, shapes emerged from the darkness.

Along the far wall was a cot, atop which were a host of ratty, threadbare blankets, all folded and stacked in perfect squares. A lantern sat unlit beside it. Beside me, just inside the door, was a set of dishes, chipped and yellowed and arranged along the wall in order according to size. A large aluminum pot hung on a nail above them. In the corner was a stack of newspapers, desiccated and brown. There must have been a thousand of them. I took one off the top. It was a *Washington Post,* dated seven years ago.

"I don't remember havin' no *boy.*"

The voice was like a blade against a whetstone. I wheeled

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around, dropping the paper. Silhouetted in the doorway was a man, near as wide as the door itself. His hair was an unruly tangle of salt and pepper, falling to his shoulders in accidental dreadlocks and framing his likewise-bearded face. Despite the heat, he wore a thick coat and heavy canvas pants. In one hand, he held a knife.

He clambered into the shack. I retreated, pressing myself tight to the far wall. "An' if I *did,*" he continued, snatching the newspaper from the floor and returning it to its stack, "I imagine I'da taught him better than to mess with my things."

"I—I'm sorry," I stammered. "I didn't think anybody actually *lived*—I mean, I thought this place was *abandoned.*"

He sized me up, his face inches from mine. His skin was dark as coffee, his features disappearing in the gloom. "Yeah, I expect that's true," he said. He turned and headed for the door, snatching the pot from its nail. "I got lunch on if you're hungry."

He left the shack and disappeared from view. I hesitated, unsure. After a moment, I followed.

He was around the side of the shack, tending to a small campfire. Strung up beside him were a half-dozen catfish. As I approached, he took one down and sliced it open. He dug out the innards with a flick of his knife, wiped the blade on the thigh of his pants, and then set about filleting the fish.

"You eatin'?" he asked.

"I'm not hungry."

"Suit yourself," he said. The fillets hissed as they hit the pan. "You got a name?"

"Tim," I replied.

"Take a seat, Tim. Name's Isaac. Don't get many visitors around here. Makes you *special,* I guess."

I sat down, the campfire between us. Isaac tended to his lunch. By the afternoon light, I saw his jacket was a faded green, all holes and frayed seams, with a V of darker green at the shoulder.

"Were you in the army?" I asked.

"I think so sometimes," he replied. "Other times, I ain't so sure. Got these memories kickin' around. Places, names, a coupla faces. Only I ain't sure if they're mine, or if I picked 'em up by mistake."

"I'm sorry I touched your stuff."

"Didn't take nothin', did you?" he asked.

"No," I replied.

"Didn't mean nothin' by it, right?"

"No."

He smiled. "Then me an' you are just fine."

"How long have you been out here?" I asked.

"Awhile," he replied. "Don't really *know* how long, to own the truth. Time don't pass the same out here. Used to be when I needed something I'd wander out into the world, but folks didn't take too kindly to havin' me around, so I stopped. Few years ago, I guess that was."

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"You miss anything? From the world, I mean."

"I got everything I need right here," he replied.

"Still," I said, "there's gotta be *something* you miss, right?"

"I ain't had a MoonPie in a damn sight."

I laughed.

"What about *you?* How come you're runnin' about in the woods all alone?"

"It's complicated."

"The world *is* that."

"There's this kid. Out there, waiting for me. I run into him, I'm dead."

"You're tougher than you think," he said, removing the pot from the flames and taking a taste. "But you wanna hide from the world, it makes no nevermind to me. I'm happy for the company."

"Come on, Isaac, where're we *going?*"

"You'll see."

We'd been walking for half an hour, following the stream as it parted ways with the train tracks and cut upward through the hills. What had started as a shallow incline had grown steeper and more uneven with every passing step. I was sweating and thirsty and my legs were burning. Isaac seemed unfazed by the hike—he strolled along beside me, nibbling contentedly at his MoonPie until all that was left of it was a constellation of crumbs in his beard and a smile on his face.

This was my third visit in as many weeks. Every time, I brought a MoonPie. And every time, when he finished, he smoothed out the cellophane wrapper, folded it in half and then in half again, and tucked it in his pocket. Twice now I'd watched in silence. But curiosity won out, and I wasn't going to make it three.

"Why do you *do* that?" I asked, breaking stride and doubling over, my hands on my knees.

"Do what?" he asked.

"The wrappers. Why do you save them?"

"Docs used to say it's somethin' broke," he said, tapping a finger to his temple, "but I never gave that much truck. I just like savin' stuff, I guess. Keeps me from forgettin'. Come on, it's just a little further."

We continued on, cresting a small ridge and sidestepping our way down a steep, fern-covered slope. When we reached the bottom, Isaac swept aside a tangle of underbrush and turned to me. "What do you think?"

We stood at the edge of a lush, green valley, wide at one end and narrow at the other. Much of the valley was taken up by the stream, which pooled, clear and cool, the width of the valley mouth. At the narrow end, a cascade of water fell maybe twenty feet, feeding the pool.

"It's *amazing,*" I said. Isaac smiled.

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"There's a cave back behind it," he said, gesturing toward the waterfall. "Ain't more'n a few feet deep, an' a little wet for an old fogy like me, but I expect a strapping young man like yourself'd find it to his liking."

I was off in a flash. Isaac hunkered down on the shore of the pond, pulled some line and a hook from his jacket, and set about overturning rocks, hunting for worms.

We spent the whole day out there, Isaac fishing, me exploring. By evening, I was soaked and exhausted. I lay on the bank of the stream, drying myself by the heat of the sun. Isaac filleted his day's catch, humming tunelessly to himself as knife parted flesh.

"I should be heading home," I said. "Mom's expecting me for dinner."

"Be dark soon," he replied. "I'll walk you back."

"I'm not an *infant,* Isaac."

"Never said you were. But these woods ain't safe."

"I can handle myself."

"All right," he replied. "But do an old man a favor and stick to the stream, okay?"

"Okay. See you later, Isaac."

"Yeah," he said, "I expect you will."

It was stupid, I thought. Sticking to the stream. If I had my bearings right, town was due east of here, and the stream was taking me southeast. When I hit Isaac's shack, I'd have to head north, and I wouldn't get home for an hour. I was sure I could shave off a few minutes if I just cut through the woods. And what was the harm? Isaac would never know the difference.

Once I cleared the gully, I put the sun behind me and plunged into the forest. It was cooler in the shade of the trees, and I shivered, my clothes still damp from the spray of the fall. I trudged exhausted through the woods, the ever-deepening shadows pointing the way. It wasn't long before I came to the lean-to.

It wasn't much to look at, just a rotten, sagging piece of plywood propped against a tree. But its right angles stood out against the chaotic backdrop of the forest, and I knew I had to see what it was.

The first thing I noticed was the smell—a tang like pennies in the back of my throat. I approached slowly. The ground under the lean-to had been brushed clear of leaves, the dirt beneath tamped down and littered with bits of fur. Tacked to the underside of the board were yellowed scraps of newspaper, stained with flecks of brown.

I crouched beside the lean-to, peering at the clippings. The text was difficult to read by the failing light. The headlines, though, were clear enough. *Animal Disappearances Plague Richmond Community. Predation Suspected in Recent Animal Deaths. Pet Problem Escalates: Sheriff Says Coyotes.*

I felt sick. I scrambled backward, away from the lean-to. My

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shoulder connected with something behind me, and I screamed.

"You weren't meant to see this."

It was Isaac. I screamed again and backed away. He grabbed me by the shoulders. Strong, unyielding. I kicked at him. He didn't let go.

"This ain't *mine,* boy, you hear me? This *ain't mine.*"

"Then whose?" I fought his grip. It was like iron.

"Damn it, kid, if I wanted to hurt you, I'da done it before now."

"*Whose is it?*"

"Don't know. Not yet. But I will. An' until I do, you're not to come near this place, you hear me?"

I nodded. He let me go.

"You an' me," he said, "we're okay?"

"Yeah," I replied. "We're okay."

"All right," he said. "Then let's get you home."

I didn't venture into the woods again that week, or at all the week after. I hung close to my house, shooting hoops in the driveway or skateboarding in the street, careful never to venture farther than a couple of blocks away, for fear that Billy was waiting. But as summer stretched on into August, the heat became unbearable, and I became listless and bored. I'd lie about, daydreaming about the vast expanses of unexplored forest, of the cool spray of the waterfall against my face, and of Isaac, fishing away the days alone.

Isaac. He must think I was scared of him. I don't know—maybe I should have been. That place and the things that had gone on there were too terrifying to contemplate. Most nights since, I'd awoken with a scream on my lips and a taste like pennies in the back of my throat. But Isaac was a good man. I refused to believe he was capable of such horrors.

I decided I had to apologize. I snatched a MoonPie from the cupboard and set out for the woods. When I got to Isaac's shack, though, he was nowhere to be seen. I checked out all his favorite fishing holes, but there was no sign of him. I hiked the length of the stream to the waterfall, scanning the underbrush for any sign I was being watched, but there was no stalker in the woods, and there was no Isaac, either. As the sun dipped toward the horizon, I turned toward home, defeated. I was still a hundred yards from the street when I heard the calls.

"Timothy! TIMOTHY!"

My mother, panicked and shrill. I was sure I'd been caught. I started toward the street, and then thought better of it, pushing through the underbrush and into the Bennett's backyard. I sprinted from yard to yard, the houses screening me from view of the street, my mother screaming all the while. I ducked onto a cross-street and rounded the corner. She spotted me immediately.

"Timothy, where have you *been!* I called the Mercers and they

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said they hadn't seen you all day—"

"I went up to the school with Ben to play some kickball," I said. She grabbed me and held me so tight I thought my ribs would crack. "What's going on?"

"Just come inside, okay?"

"Mom, what's going on?"

"Inside."

She dragged me into the house. Dad was on the phone, pacing. When he saw us come through the door, he stopped.

"Never mind," he said into the receiver, "we found him." He hung up the phone. "Where the hell have you been? Your mother was worried sick about you."

"I was playing kickball up at the school. What's the matter?"

"It's the Ashbrook girl," Mom said. "She's gone missing."

"She hasn't *gone missing,*" Dad snapped. "She was *taken.* They found her bike on the side of the road, coupla blocks from her house. Looked like there was a struggle. Half the town's looking for her. For you, too, thanks to your mother. You gave us a hell of a scare, kiddo."

I sat down heavily on the sofa. My stomach churned. Alison had been taken.

"Do they know when she disappeared?"

"Sometime this afternoon," Mom replied.

"Nobody saw anything?"

"No," she said. "But the police have been brought in. I'm sure she'll be just fine."

Fine, right. But I knew different. I couldn't let it happen.

"They should search the woods," I said.

"Honey, I'm sure they're doing everything they possibly can to find your friend," she replied, but I cut her off.

"There's a lean-to a couple miles west of here," I said. "It's covered in newspaper clippings of the animals that went missing."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Dad said, angry.

"They have to search the lean-to. Whoever killed those animals may have Alison. If I'm right, he means to kill her, too."

"When were you out in those woods?"

"That's where I've been going. Not to Ben's. Not to Steve's. Not for a while. You *have* to listen to me. We don't have much time."

Dad slapped me, hard. My face stung, and tears welled in my eyes, but I bit them back.

"You expect us to listen to you when you've been lying to us all summer? When you've been sneaking off to God-knows-where?"

"David, don't," Mom said.

"He brought this on himself," he replied. "We trusted him and he *lied* to us."

"Punish me if you want," I said, shaking with rage. "But that doesn't change the fact that she's out there and if they don't find her she's going to *die.*"

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"I've heard all I need to hear from you," Dad replied. "You scared us half to death. Go to your room, and don't come out until I say you can, you hear me?"

I looked at Mom. She looked away.

Without a word, I climbed the stairs to my room.

I crouched low to the ground, invisible in the darkness. Ahead was the lean-to, black in the failing light.

I hefted the pocketknife in my hand. It wasn't much, but it'd have to do. I wondered if my parents had noticed yet. The empty room, the screen pried open. I hoped they had. They knew where I'd be going, and angry or not, they'd have to follow.

I crept toward the lean-to, knife held ready. My heart thudded in my chest. At the edge of the plywood, I stopped, listening. There was no telltale sound, no flicker of lamplight. I wondered if I'd been wrong. I half hoped I was. With a breath, I wheeled around the corner, knife held high.

There, lying on the ground, was Alison. Her hands and feet were bound with duct tape. A thick strip of tape sealed shut her mouth. Her eyes flitted behind closed lids. She was still alive.

"Alison," I whispered, shaking her gently. "Alison, it's me, Tim. I'm here to rescue you."

From behind me, I heard the snap of a twig in the darkness. Sudden, close. I spun, slashing wildly. Blade caught fabric, and my attacker screamed in pain. Too late I saw the rock in his hand, swinging toward me. It connected with my temple, and I went down.

My vision swam. I forced myself to my knees, tried to stand. Then the rock came down again, and everything went dark.

I woke by degrees. My head throbbed. My stomach roiled. My tongue felt too big for my mouth. Alison lay beside me, unconscious and still bound. I flexed my arms beneath me. They were leaden and stiff, but free.

I lifted my head and looked around. A lantern flickered in the center of the room. Beside me was a set of chipped, yellowed plates, arranged according to size. Hunched over the cot at the far end of the room was Isaac, his back to me. As I watched, he lifted his arms above his head, fists clenched together, and brought them down, hard.

I climbed unsteadily to my feet. On the cot lay a boy. Isaac raised his fists and brought them down again. They slammed into the boy's rib cage with a dull thud. I winced. He raised his arms again.

"Isaac," I said. The word felt foreign in my mouth.

"You're not meant to see this," he growled, not turning.

"Isaac, leave him alone," I said, creeping closer. Isaac's knife lay beside him on the floor, glinting in the lamplight.

"You're not meant to see this!" he shouted, spinning toward me. I

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lunged for the knife. Isaac just watched.

"Get away from him," I said, brandishing the knife before me.

"Tim—"

"Now, Isaac."

Isaac backed away. I circled toward the cot, my eyes never leaving Isaac. Once he moved beyond arm's reach, I turned my attention to the boy.

Billy McMahon lay still on the cot, eyes closed. His nose was bloodied and crooked, and he wasn't breathing. Across his chest was a single shallow gash, streaking his shirt with blood. The gash of a pocketknife.

Isaac's knife clattered to the floor beside me. *"Billy?"* I said.

"That's what she called him," Isaac said, nodding toward Alison, "right before he gagged her."

"Is he dead?"

"Yeah."

"You did this?"

He nodded. "I was waitin' for dark," he said. "Figured if he saw me comin', he might hurt her. But then you showed up, an' he . . ." Tears shone in Isaac's eyes. "He was gonna *kill* you."

I thought of Isaac, hunched over the boy. Fists against chest. Pounding out a rhythm. A heartbeat. "You were trying to save him, weren't you?"

"Way I see it, he wasn't mine to take."

"Isaac, I'm sorry."

"Yeah," he said. "I expect that's true."

Suddenly Isaac straightened, cocking his head. I opened my mouth to ask what was wrong, and then froze. I heard it, too. Dogs. Distant, but approaching fast.

"Isaac, you have to go," I said.

"The girl needs help," he replied. He collected his knife from the floor and crouched over Alison, cutting her free.

"Isaac, they'll be here soon. You have to get out of here, give me time to explain . . ."

It was too late. They were just outside the shack.

"We know you're in there! Send out the children!"

"They ain't gonna let me go," Isaac said.

"I'll tell them what happened. They'll understand—they'll *have* to."

"They won't."

"You don't know that," I said.

"I do, an' so do you."

"Then I'll stall them," I said. "Buy you time to—"

"To *what?* Ain't no other way outta here."

"Damn it, Isaac, *I don't know!"*

Outside, the dogs brayed. The man called out again. *"Release the children now!"*

"Look," I said. "You have to let me try."

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Isaac smiled. "You're a good man, Timothy."

"Sure," I said. "Now help me get her up."

Isaac lifted Alison and handed her to me. I got my arms under her back and knees and held her tight.

"Tim?"

"Yeah?"

"Be safe."

"You, too," I replied.

I approached the door. "We're coming out!" I shouted. I kicked open the door and stepped outside, stopping just beyond the threshold. A half-dozen lanterns pushed back the darkness. The search party was maybe twenty feet away, mostly uniformed, guns at the ready. My father was there, and Alison's as well.

"Is the girl hurt?" shouted one of the officers.

"She's out," I replied, "but I think she's okay."

"Is there anyone else in the cabin?"

"Yes," I replied. "But he had nothing to do with this."

"Son, if you could just walk slowly toward us . . ."

"I can't—not until you promise me he won't be hurt!"

"Just step aside, son. Everything will be just fine."

"He didn't do anything wrong," I replied. "It was Billy. Billy McMahon."

"You lyin' son of a bitch!" A man stumbled toward me, stopping midway between the shack and the search party. He was unshaven and reeked of whiskey. A lantern swung precariously in one hand. "Nobody talks about my boy like that!"

"Sir, step away from the cabin," said an officer.

"The hell I will! You tell me where my boy is!"

"He's dead."

He charged me, screaming. A single shot rang out. Blood sprayed red from his shoulder, just a graze, but he spun and fell. The lantern shattered as it hit the ground.

The weeds were dry and brittle, and caught instantly. I stumbled backward toward the stream, Alison heavy in my arms. Flames engulfed the bank, cutting us off from the rescue party. Isaac's shack went up like so much tinder.

I splashed into the water. Fire rained down as the canopy caught. Thick smoke seared my lungs. The entire forest was ablaze. My face stung from the heat. I heard nothing but the roar of the flames.

The stream was barely two feet deep. Not deep enough to stop the flames. I kept low to the surface, dragging Alison along behind.

The waterfall, I thought. Our only chance. I struggled on, choking on the acrid, poison air. I was dizzy. My vision went dark, and I slipped below the surface.

Fingers tangled in my hair. Yanking. My head broke the surface of the water. I gasped, suddenly alert. Beside me was Alison, wide-eyed and frightened, but awake. She put an arm around my

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shoulder, and together we pressed on as the world burned around us.

By the time we were found, we'd spent ten hours huddled together beneath the fall. Eighty acres burned that night, they told us. Had the wind shifted, it might have been eight hundred.

Billy's father died in the blaze. Mom said better that than know the truth. I don't know, maybe she was right. The truth is never quite as simple as we'd like it to be.

I sit and sip my tea, watching over the porch rail as the sky lightens in the east. Behind me, the screen door creaks. Alison steps out into the pre-dawn half-light wrapped in a bathrobe, her hair mussed from sleep. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

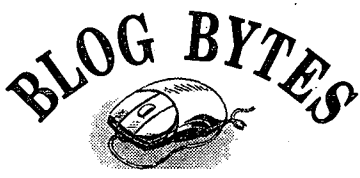
"Couldn't sleep?" she asks.

"Guess not," I reply.

"Everything all right?"

I think back to that summer, so many years ago. And, weeks later, to that cool September morning when I found on my porch a single MoonPie wrapper, carefully folded and placed beneath a chipped and yellowed bowl.

"Yeah," I reply. "I think it is." ●



by Ed Gorman

The Carolyn Hart website. This website offers Hart fans and readers a well-organized and useful look at both the books and the life of a writer who took many of the cozy conventions and tropes and gave them much more depth than they once possessed. Especially notable is Carolyn's advice to writers, in which she talks about how difficult but rewarding the writing process can be. A major talent and a very cordial guide through the world of publishing, she has a site that warrants frequent visits. **http://www.carolynhart.com**

The Jan Burke website. Jan is not only a bestselling writer, as she notes, she's also "the founder of The Crime Lab Project, which works to increase awareness of the problems facing public forensic science labs in the U.S.," so you'll find not only material about Jan and her books but some impressive material on this particular subject. Jan makes very clear what her website readers can find here: "This is a place where readers can ask questions and get information about my books and stories, and where I'll be talking about subjects both related and unrelated to my writing." An excellent site. **http://janburke.com/blog.html**

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The Winning Ticket

by Bill Pronzini

Jake Runyon and I were hunched over mugs of coffee and tea in an all-night diner near the Cow Palace when the man and woman blew in out of the rain.

Blew in is the right phrase. They came fast through the door, leaning forward, prodded by the howling wind. Nasty night out there. One of the hard-rain, big-wind storms that sometimes hammer the California coast during an El Niño winter.

The man shook himself dog-like, shedding rainwater off a shaved head and a threadbare topcoat, before the two of them slid into one of the side-wall booths. That was as much attention as I paid to them at first. He wasn't the man we were waiting for.

"After eleven," I said to Runyon. "Looks like Maxwell's a no-show again tonight."

"Weather like this, he'll probably stay holed up."

"And so we get to do it all over again tomorrow night."

"You want to give it a few more minutes?"

"Might as well. At least until the rain lets up a little."

Floyd Maxwell was a deadbeat dad, the worst kind. Spousal abuser who owed his ex more than thirty thousand dollars in unpaid child support for their two kids; hard to catch because he kept moving around in and out of the city, never staying in one place longer than a couple of months, and because he had the kind of job—small-business computer consultant—that allowed him to work from any location. Our agency had been hired by the ex's father and we'd tracked Maxwell to this neighborhood, but we'd been unable to pinpoint an exact address; all we knew was that since he'd moved here, he ate in the Twenty-Four/Seven Diner most evenings after ten o'clock, when there were few customers. Bracing him was a two-man job because of his size and his history of violent behavior. Runyon was twenty years younger than me, a

2007 marks the 40th anniversary of the "Nameless" detective series (to which this story belongs), making it the longest-running of all ongoing P.I. series. Nameless's 31st book-length case, *Savages*, is due soon from Forge, and another Pronzini novel, *The Crimes of Jordan Wise* (Walker 2006) has just been nominated for the prestigious Hammett Award. †

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former Seattle cop with a working knowledge of judo; Tamara and I couldn't have hired a tougher or more experienced field operative when we'd decided to expand the agency.

This was our third night staked out here and so far all we had to show for it were sour stomachs from too much caffeine. I had mixed feelings about the job anyway.

On the one hand, I don't like deadbeat dads or spousal abusers and nailing one was always a source of satisfaction. On the other hand, it amounted to a bounty hunt, the two of us sitting here with handcuffs in our pockets waiting to make a citizen's arrest of a fugitive, and I've never much cared for that kind of strong-arm work. Or the type of people who do it for a living.

The new couple were the only other customers right now. The counterman, a thin young guy with a long neck and not much chin, leaned over the counter and called out to them, "What can I get you folks?"

"Coffee," the man said. He was about forty, well set-up, pasty-faced and hard-eyed. Some kind of tattoo crawled up the side of his neck; another covered the back of one hand. He glanced at the woman. "You want anything, Lila?"

"No."

"Couple of hamburgers to go," he said to the counterman. "One with everything, one with just the meat. Side of fries."

"Anything to drink with that?"

"More coffee, biggest you got. Milk."

"For the coffee?"

"In a carton. For drinking."

The counterman said, "Coming up," and turned to the grill.

The tattooed guy said to the woman, "You better have something. We got a long drive ahead of us."

"I couldn't eat, Kyle." She was maybe thirty, a washed-out, purse-lipped blonde who might have been pretty once—the type who perpetually makes the wrong choices with the wrong people and shows the effects. "I feel kind of sick."

"Yeah? Why didn't you stay in the car?"

"You know why. I couldn't listen to it anymore."

"Well, you better get used to it."

"It breaks my heart. I still think—"

"I don't care what you think. Just shut up."

Lila subsided, slouching down in the booth so that her head rested against the low back. Runyon and I were both watching them now, without being obvious about it. Eye-corner studies with our heads held still.

Pretty soon the woman said, "Why'd we have to stop here, so close? Why couldn't we just keep going?"

"It's a lousy night and I'm hungry."

"Hungry. After what just happened I don't see how you—"

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"Didn't I just tell you to shut up?"

The counterman set a mug of steaming coffee on the counter. "You'll have to come get it," he said. "I got to watch the burgers."

Neither of the pair made a move to leave the booth. Kyle leaned forward and snapped at her in a low voice, "Well? Don't just sit there like a dummy. Get the coffee."

Grimacing, she slid out and fetched the coffee for him. She didn't sit down again. "I don't feel so good," she said.

"So go outside, get some air."

"No. I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Yeah, well, don't do it here."

She turned away from him, putting a hand up to cover her mouth, and half ran into the areaway that led to the restrooms. A door slammed back there. Kyle loaded sugar into his coffee, made slurping sounds as he drank it.

"Hurry up with the food," he called to the counterman.

"Almost ready."

It got quiet in there, except for the meat-sizzle on the grill, the French fries cooking in their basket of hot oil. Outside, the wind continued to beat at the front of the diner, but the rain seemed to have slacked off some.

Runyon and I watched Kyle finish his coffee. For a few seconds he sat drumming on the tabletop. Then he smacked it with his palm, slid out, and came up to the counter two stools down from where we were sitting. He stood watching the counterman wrap the burgers in waxed paper, put them into a sack with the fries; pour coffee into one container, milk into another.

"How much?" he said.

"Just a second while I ring it up."

Kyle looked over toward the areaway, scowling. Lila still hadn't reappeared.

"Hope your friend's okay," the counterman said.

"Just mind your own business, pal."

The total for the food was twelve dollars. Kyle dragged a worn wallet out of his pocket, slapped three bills down next to the two bags. When he did that I had a clear look at the tattoo on his wrist—Odin's cross. There were bloody scrapes across the knuckles on that hand, crimson spots on the sleeve of his topcoat; the blood hadn't completely coagulated yet. Under the open coat, on the left side at the belt, I had a glimpse of wood and metal.

I was closest to him and he caught me paying attention. "What the hell you looking at?"

I didn't say anything.

"Keep your eyes to yourself, you know what's good for you."

I let that pass too.

Lila came out of the restroom looking pale. "About damn time," Kyle said to her.

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"I couldn't help it. I told you I was sick."

"Take those sacks and let's go."

She picked up the sacks and they started for the door. As far as Lila was concerned, the rest of us weren't even there; she was focused on Kyle and her own misery. Otherwise she might've been more careful about what she said on the way.

"Kyle . . . you won't hurt him, will you?"

"Don't be stupid."

"You hit him twice already . . ."

"A couple of slaps, big deal. He's not hurt."

"You get crazy sometimes. What you did to his mother—"

"Dammit, keep your voice down."

"But what if she calls the—"

"She won't. She knows better. Now shut up!"

They were at the door by then. And out into the gibbering night.

I glanced at Runyon. "Who's the plain burger and milk for, if she's too sick to eat?"

"Yeah," he said, and we were both off our stools and moving. Trust your instincts.

At the door I said, "Watch yourself. He's armed."

"I know, I saw it too."

Outside the rain had eased up to a fine drizzle, but the wind was still beating the night in bone-chilling gusts. The slick black street and sidewalks were empty except for the two of them off to our right, their backs to us, Kyle moving around to the driver's door of a Subaru Outback parked two car-lengths away. There was a beeping sound as he used the remote on his key chain to unlock the doors.

Runyon and I made our approach in long silent strides, not too fast. You don't want to run or make noise in a situation like this; it only invites a panic reaction. What we did once Kyle saw us depended on what he did. The one thing we wouldn't do was to give chase if he jumped into the car, locked the doors, and drove away; that kind of nonsense is strictly Hollywood. In that scenario we'd back off and call it in and let the police handle it.

The woman, Lila, opened the passenger-side door. The dome light came on, providing a vague lumpish view of a rear cargo space packed with suitcases and the like. But it was what spilled out from inside, identifiable in the wind-lull that followed, that tightened muscles all through my body. A child crying—broken, frightened sobs that went on and on.

We were nearing the Outback by then, off the curb and into the street. Close enough to make out the rain-spattered license plate. 5QQX700—an easy one to remember. But I didn't need to remember it. The way things went down, the plate number was irrelevent.

Lila saw us first. She called, "Kyle!" and jerked back from the open passenger door.

He was just opening the driver's side. He came around fast, but

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he didn't do anything else for a handful of seconds. Just stood there staring at us as we advanced, still at the measured pace, Runyon a couple of steps to my left so we both had a clear path to him.

Runyon put up a hand, making it look nonthreatening, and said in neutral tones, "Talk to you for a minute?"

No. It wasn't going to go down that way—reasonable, nonviolent.

At just that moment a car swung around the corner up ahead, throwing mist-smeared headlight glare over the four of us and the Outback. The light seemed to jump-start Kyle. He didn't try to get inside; he jammed the door shut and went for the weapon he had under his coat.

Runyon got to him first, just as the gun came out, and knocked his arm back.

A beat or two later I shouldered into him, hard, pinning the left side of his body against the wet metal. That gave Runyon time to judo-chop his wrist and loosen his grip on the gun. A second chop drove it right out of his hand, sent it clattering along the pavement.

Things got a little wild then. Kyle fought us, snarling; he was big and angry and even though there were two of us, just as big, he was no easy handful. The woman stood off from the Outback, yelling like a banshee. The other car, the one with the lights, skidded to a stop across the street. The wind howled, the child shrieked. I had a vague aural impression of running footsteps, someone else yelling.

It took maybe a minute's worth of teamwork to put an end to the struggle. I managed finally to get a two-handed hold on Kyle's arms, which allowed Runyon to step free and slam the edge of his hand down on the exposed joining of neck and shoulder. The blow paralyzed the right side of Kyle's body. After that we were able to wrestle him to the wet pavement, stretch him out belly down. I pulled his arms back and held them while Runyon knelt in the middle of his back, snapped handcuffs around his wrists.

I stood up first, breathing hard—and a white, scared face was peering at me through the rear window. A little boy, six or seven, wrapped in a blanket, his cheeks streaked with tears. Past him, on the other side of the car, I could see Lila standing, quiet now, with both hands fisted against her mouth.

Runyon said, "Where's the gun?"

"I don't know. I heard it hit the pavement—"

"I've got it."

I turned around. It was the guy from the car that had pulled up across the street; he'd come running over to rubberneck. He stood a short distance away, holding the revolver in one hand, loosely, as if he didn't know what to do with it. Heavyset and bald, I saw as I went up to him. Eyebrows like miniature tumbleweeds.

"What's going on?" he said.

"Police business."

"Yeah? You guys cops?"

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"Making an arrest." I held out my hand, palm up. "Let's have the gun."

He hesitated, but just briefly. Then he said, "Sure, sure," and laid it on my palm.

And I backed up a step and pointed it at a spot two inches below his chin.

"Hey!" He gawped at me in disbelief. "Hey, what's the idea?"

"The idea," I said, "is for you to turn around, slow, and clasp your hands together behind you. Do it—now!"

He did it. He didn't have any choice.

I gave the gun to Runyon. And then, shaking my head, smiling a little, I snapped my set of handcuffs around Floyd Maxwell's wrists.

Funny business, detective work. Crazy business sometimes. Mostly it's a lot of dull routine, with small triumphs and as much frustration as satisfaction. But once in a great while something happens that not only makes it all worthwhile but defies the laws of probability. Call it whatever you like—random accident, multiple coincidence, star-and-planet convergence, fate, blind luck, divine intervention. It happens. It happened to Jake Runyon and me that stormy February night.

An ex-con named Kyle Franklin, fresh out of San Quentin after serving six years for armed robbery, decides he wants sole custody of his seven-year-old son. He drags his girlfriend to San Francisco, where his former wife is raising the boy as a single mom, and beats and threatens the ex-wife and kidnaps the child. Rather than leave the city quick, he decides he needs some sustenance for the long drive to Lila's place in L.A. and stops at the first diner he sees, less than a quarter-mile from the ex-wife's apartment building—a diner where two case-hardened private detectives happen to be staked out.

We overhear part of his conversation with Lila and it sounds wrong to us. We notice the blood on his coat sleeve, the scraped knuckles, his prison pallor, the Odin's cross—a prison tattoo and racist symbol—on his wrist, and the fact that he's carrying a concealed weapon. So we follow him outside and brace him, he pulls the gun, and while we're struggling, our deadbeat dad chooses that moment to show up. The smart thing for Maxwell to have done was to drive off, avoid trouble; instead he lets his curiosity and arrogance get the best of him, and comes over to watch, and then picks up Franklin's gun and hands it to me nice as you please. And so we foil a kidnapping and put the arm on not one but two violent, abusive fathers in the space of about three minutes.

What are the odds? Astronomical. You could live three or four lifetimes and nothing like it would ever happen again.

It's a little like hitting the Megabucks state lottery.

That night, Runyon and I were the ones holding the winning ticket. ●

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Ibrahim's Eyes

by David Dean

"'Ibrahim's Eyes' was inspired by a largely forgotten, unhappy chapter in our military history," David Dean told *EQMM*. "I was with the Army's 82 Airborne when the events described occurred, and remember the anguish we felt for our brothers in arms, the Marines. Those days were to have far-reaching repercussions. We should have paid more attention at the time." †

Sean Lafferty slouched behind the counter of the Quik and EZ Mart and watched his reflection stare back at him from the plate-glass doors that fronted the small store. If he stepped away from the counter his phantom self would vanish from the glass, sucked into oblivion by the remaining illumination. Occasionally, he would shift to one side or the other and his ghost would mimic him, wavering slightly, or disappearing altogether as a pair of headlights swept across the store from a car entering the parking lot. When the headlamps were switched off, his pale Doppelgänger, drained of blood by the softly buzzing fluorescents, would reappear to resume its study of its earthly counterpart. This could go on for long periods of time, and often would but for the interruption of customers, yet the sign, the thought, the emotion that Sean kept looking for remained steadfastly locked behind his own alien visage.

He knew that seen from outside, he would appear to be waiting for the Q&E's nocturnal patrons—nervous teenagers in need of condoms; even more nervous young mothers who had woefully miscalculated the diaper count and were now forced out into the midnight world; or perhaps a sudden brash invasion of young men intent on menace and calculating the odds of taking the store's earnings by force, or just sheer intimidation. The graveyard shift was a perilous, haphazard world and Sean's apparent alertness was not altogether a front. Once another human being appeared from the darkness beyond his image, Sean's attention was subtly refocused, and he bid farewell to his mute self.

The customer that stepped onto the lighted stage beneath the working outside lights raised a hand in salute, and Sean did the same. Moments later he emerged from the pool of darkness that

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shrouded the double doors into the store.

"Those lights, Sean." The police sergeant pointed over his shoulder. "They've been that way for months. Not smart."

"No, sir," Sean agreed. "I keep tellin' Mr. Corrado about 'em." Sean was older than the officer by at least seven or eight years, but he could not refrain from calling him "sir"—it was the three stripes on his sleeve. A long time before, Sean had been a marine, and it was the only time in his life that remained vivid in his mind. His present was hazy and insubstantial, and he just a ghost that haunted it. "He's busy opening that new store on the other side of town," he added by way of explanation. A long cardboard box of the tubes lay untouched in the storeroom, and whenever the manager thought to ask about them, Sean would lie and say simply that he had forgotten to install them. This explanation would suffice as the harried Mr. Corrado scurried from crisis to crisis in stores that lay scattered across the city.

The policeman, a somewhat portly but light-footed man, suddenly diverged from his course toward Sean and glided over to the coffee stand. Sean watched as the sergeant carefully chose a flavored coffee from the row of stagnant pots and proceeded to add a different flavored creamer and two packages of sugar substitute to his choice. After stirring all these ingredients to his satisfaction, he waltzed over to the counter and plopped the concoction down in front of Sean, his breathing slightly labored.

"No charge," Sean assured him, as the officer dug into his wallet. This was a ritual the two men went through on a regular basis.

"You sure?" Sergeant Fullerton asked, fulfilling his half of the litany.

Sean nodded and the policeman raised his paper cup in a toast and then brought it gingerly to his lips. As usual, Sean noticed, he had filled it too full. With a gasp, the sergeant snatched the brimming container away from his lips with a muttered exclamation. "Damn . . . that's too hot!" Several spoonfuls of the steaming liquid sloshed over with his sudden movement and the policeman danced deftly away, avoiding getting any on his snug uniform. The stain the coffee made on the dirty linoleum was only noticeable for its gleaming liquidity.

"Don't worry about it," Sean murmured from his seat.

"No, hell, hand me some paper towels," Sergeant Fullerton demanded. "It's my fault. . . . I'll clean it up."

Sean did as he was bid and reached under the counter where a roll was kept for just such emergencies. He tore off several and handed them across the counter. After carefully placing his cup on the countertop, the sergeant bent grunting to his task. Sean studied the bald spot that was developing at the crown of the officer's skull. His own hair had remained full and thick through the years and only recently had streaks of gray begun to show themselves.

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People usually thought he was younger than he was.

Sergeant Fullerton's voice came up to him a little strangled. "How come you're always on midnight shift? Ain't you got some seniority, or something? Been round here forever!" This last he said as he straightened up, his features flushed and congested-looking.

Sean caught a glimpse of his own face across the room, his head a pale balloon floating over the policeman's shoulder. "Doesn't bother me," he said quietly.

"I can't wait to get off night shifts," the sergeant complained. "Damn things'll kill ya!"

"It's quiet," Sean offered.

"Yeah, it's quiet," the policeman repeated as he surveyed the shabby, empty store. "Quiet until someone comes charging in here to rob you, and maybe kill your ass in the bargain. Couldn't pay me to sit here like a fish in a bowl, waitin' for some mangy cat to take notice!"

Sean's gaze drifted downward and he whispered, "No, sir."

The sergeant's voice softened. "Hell, you don't have to 'sir' me, Sean. How old are you, anyway?"

"Forty," Sean answered, looking back at Sergeant Fullerton now.

"Forty," the officer repeated dubiously. "You're kiddin' me, right? You don't look no forty. Hell, I'm younger'n you! What's your secret?"

Sean thought for a second, and then smiled. "I keep out of the sun," he replied.

Sergeant Fullerton stared for a moment, then guffawed. "By God, you do that!" He chuckled a few moments more, then grew serious. "Listen, Sean, you been watchin' the news?"

Sean shook his head. He rarely watched the news programs.

"How 'bout the papers? You been readin' what's goin' on in this area?"

Again Sean shook his head.

The sergeant studied him in puzzlement. "You ain't just stayin' out of the sun, you're stayin' out of life altogether. Maybe that's the real secret." It was the officer's turn to shake his large round head. "Anyway," he resumed heavily, "there's a gang of some kind been workin' our end of the state pretty serious. They like stores just like this one—open all night, lone operator in the wee hours, deal largely in cash. Get me? It's not a snatch-and-run outfit, Sean. They mean business and they're not leavin' witnesses. They've killed three, so far . . . and they take the security tapes, the whole damn cassette recorder if they have to."

Outside the store, a car cruised through the small, littered parking lot. As the headlights swept across the patrol car outside, they appeared to hesitate, then resumed the arc that meant they had continued on to the exit. A fissure of white gleamed through a bro-

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ken taillight lens. Sergeant Fullerton, his back to the lot, did not notice, and Sean gave no indication of what he had witnessed. During the course of a shift, perhaps half a dozen cars would perform the same maneuver.

"So we don't have a clue as to what they look like," Sergeant Fullerton went on. "No vehicle description. Nothin'. But, they do shoot. The state police have recovered three bullets from the skulls of three night clerks . . . all small caliber. A ladies' gun, a .25, I believe, and they use it up close and personal, execution style with a mean twist." He placed an extended forefinger against the soft flesh that sagged beneath his jaws. "Straight up to the brain pan. The last thing those poor bastards got to see was their killer's grinning face.

"I'm not tryin' to scare you, Sean, but I can't help but worry with you sittin' on the edge of town out here."

Sean was touched by the officer's concern. They really hardly knew each other. "Well," Sean ventured over a rising feeling of excitement, "it wouldn't do to have Mrs. Fisher or little Megan in here for me."

"No, I didn't mean that," Sergeant Fullerton continued impatiently. "Talk to Mr. Corrado about closing down early for a few weeks, until we catch these thugs. How much money can he make between midnight and eight that would make it worth it?"

Sean pretended to think this over.

Sergeant Fullerton studied his face as if noticing for the first time the vertical creases that ran from cheekbone to chin amidst the salt-and-pepper whiskers of the night clerk's five o'clock shadow—as if it was occurring to him that, but for Sean's vague, wistful gaze, a certain hardness might lie at the core of the man.

"I'll mention it," Sean lied. "But we make a lot of money up till about two A.M."

"Not enough," the policeman assured Sean as he wedged a travel cap onto the cup of coffee and turned for the exit. "I'll try to get cars out here as often as I can," he promised over his shoulder.

"Thanks," Sean said to his own image as the glass door swung closed behind the sergeant.

Sean slept poorly that day. After the kindly policeman's visit, a growing sense of alertness, a tingling, nervous energy, began to course through his veins. He felt like a person who had just awakened to a cry from another room, startled and uncertain as to its meaning. He was not afraid as a result of the officer's warning, but excited the way he had been as a child watching a summer storm rolling across the landscape, its belly dark and full of lightning, the hot, humid air charged with menace and hidden meaning. So he was not surprised when he dreamt of Beirut.

The chaotic, crashing images of his dream would not have been

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recognizable as a geographic locale to anyone else, as they held significance only for the dreamer, but to Sean the very smell and taste of "The Root," as he and his fellow marines had dubbed it, flooded his senses.

He stood on a third-floor balcony of the battalion landing team's command post looking back over his shoulder. Somewhere to the front of the building he had heard the revving of an engine, and in the predawn quiet it seemed very loud. He was glancing back to see if the noise had disturbed any of his fellow marines in the room behind him, where most of his squad lay cocooned in their sleeping bags, but besides the usual grunts, snores, and farts of slumberous young men, they appeared unperturbed. This amused Sean and he smiled and turned away. The dreaming Sean smiled also.

As his dream self watched the coming dawn tint the Lebanese sky with blood, a crash came to his ears, and a splintering of wood. The truck, or whatever it was, sounded much closer. He leaned over the wall of the balcony in an attempt to see what was going on, but was rewarded with nothing but the sight of a few heads popping out from the bunkers and makeshift shelters that dotted the edges of the airport tarmac, swiveling this way and that in an attempt to locate the disturbance that had roused them from a Sunday's slumber. From somewhere below him there was the crashing of glass, and he counted two rifle shots. A moment later, a sergeant he thought he recognized charged out of the building's lobby and into his field of vision. Sean thought he had never seen someone run so fast before, or perhaps it was just an effect of the acute angle from which he watched. A husky voice from behind him called out groggily, "Dude, what the f—k is goin'—" The sleeping Sean sucked in his breath. This was when it happened.

Suddenly he was flying, or more accurately hurtling through the air, over the very heads that he had just been smiling down on. Though he was enveloped by clouds that billowed grey and soft, he felt no sense of peace, as his breath had been sucked from his lungs and he was choking and on fire; an angel cast down from heaven. Other objects whistled by him in this celestial pollution—body parts and glass; concrete and steel reinforcing rods; boots and vehicle parts; all seeking new converts to their miraculous liberation. The maelstrom around Sean shrieked with the flight of unseen banshees.

Then, with an unceremonious thump, he was thrown to the earth like litter from a speeding car, and left to stare upwards at a heaven obscured by tons of ferroconcrete dust, while all around him objects, some horribly recognizable and others mercifully indescribable, fell from the sky like a hellish plague. He was alive.

This was where Sean would awaken, just as he had awakened in the makeshift Battalion Aid Station a day later, bewildered at the

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sudden shift in reality, but largely unhurt. He would not believe the corpsmen who insisted the entire battalion command post was simply no more, and grew combative when they told him that two hundred and forty-one of his fellow marines had died in the carnage of the truck bombing. He had known that this could not be true, as he was still living—could not be true. He could not have survived such a catastrophe.

Then a lieutenant with an engineering degree had tried to explain it to him, saying that it was likely the very explosion that had doomed so many within the building had lofted him along on a cushion of hot gases, and set him down with surprising gentleness as those same gases dissipated into the unconfined atmosphere. "A miracle, nonetheless," the well-meaning officer had assured him. "Bullshit, sir," Sean had replied courteously.

The following day he had been released for duty. Still angry over the inexplicable pessimism of his normally gung-ho fellow marines, he strode directly to the site of the command post. It wasn't there.

Sean had stared in incomprehension, turning this way and that in an attempt to get his bearings. Somehow he had become disoriented and had arrived at the wrong location. *It's concussion,* he had assured himself. That was the only possible explanation for his sudden loss of direction within the limited confines of his unit's area of operations. Had he not spent the last five months of his life dodging Shiite sniper bullets, Druze artillery rounds, and the occasional Syrian-made rocket right here in the Corps' stinking little piece of Beirut?

A corporal had walked towards him dragging a poncho liner full of something and dropped it heavily at his feet. "Pull your head out of your butt, Marine, and get this over to the morgue." Sean had stared back at the NCO blankly. "And when you're done, double-time back here . . . there's still a lot to clean up." He had hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the tons of rubble behind him. Only then did Sean allow himself to see and recognize.

The administration building that the Beirut Airport had given over to the marines for their command post lay in the grave that the basement had provided, floor upon floor having collapsed in on itself after the Iranian Revolutionary Guardsman had driven his twelve thousand pounds of explosives into the lobby and detonated them. Sean had seen then . . . and believed. Then the poncho liner had fallen open.

When Sean climbed out of bed, he felt sore and tired, as if he had relived the experience his dream commemorated. Even so, the excitement the police sergeant's warning had engendered remained, and he felt unaccustomedly cheerful and optimistic. The possibility of a threat to his life had somehow reconnected him to

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the living world, awakened him as if from a deep, deep slumber. As he poured milk over his cereal and gazed out his kitchen window, he could see children returning from school, chattering like jays and darting this way and that over the sidewalk, the energy of youth rendering them unable to walk the sad straight line of adults, and for the first time in many, many years, he thought of Ibrahim.

In the days following the bombing, Sean had found himself more and more frequently manning Combat Post 69. This was directly due to the loss of personnel, and had the bombing not happened, he would have complained bitterly at such long pulls of hazardous duty. CP 69 was not sentry duty. CP 69 was where you provided target practice for the Shiite militia in "Hooterville," a slum otherwise known to its inhabitants as Hay-Es-Salaam. It was rumored that in the early days of the Marines' peacekeeping mission, when all had been well betwixt the peacekeepers and the Muslims, two lovely Lebanese girls had made a habit of undressing in front of their window, which faced the Americans' outpost. Hence the name Hooterville. Sean suspected this had been wishful thinking on the part of some lonely marines, as the Muslim girls were known to be notoriously, and disappointingly, strait-laced. Nonetheless, the name stuck.

But in the months of August and September, relations between the Marines and all the factions involved in the Lebanese Civil War deteriorated rapidly and violently, and CP 69 had become an extremely hot spot. They were routinely shot at and rocketed from every quarter. Infuriatingly, the rules of engagement laid down from on high made it nearly impossible for the beleaguered troops to properly defend themselves. After the bombing, the marines, and Sean, found ways.

One of the rules that Sean and the other surviving members of his company quickly dispensed with was the prohibition on returning fire at a combatant who could not be clearly seen actively firing at them. As the enemy usually chose to shoot from the upper windows of the bombed-out buildings that looked down on CP 69, and then ducked back inside, this had always been extremely impractical. Now, they always "saw" the militiaman, and after chasing him away from the window with a hail of bullets, they would follow up with a few carefully placed grenades. This had the effect of silencing that particular room, and the marines could rest assured that at least one, if not more, of the militiamen would fail to answer roll call the following morning.

After several days of this, there was a dramatic lessening of incoming fire. From several thousand rounds of small-arms fire a day, and hundreds of rocket-propelled grenades and frequent mortar barrages, they were faced with what, as seen in comparison, was a desultory few hundred rounds and only the occasional

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grenade. The Shiite militiamen seemed to be thinking things over.

It was during this lull that Sean and his newly constituted squad discovered Ibrahim. Sean first saw him at the Lebanese army checkpoint located across the street from CP 69. He appeared to be entertaining the soldiers with some kind of story that involved episodes of break dancing, and the government troops were enjoying the show immensely. These soldiers were ostensibly the Americans' allies in their failing mission to keep the peace between all the warring factions in their country. However, experience had taught the marines that their commitment to that mission varied wildly, and appeared to be based on the quality of the opposition they faced. When they fought, they fought ferociously, but often they would stay their hand for reasons known only to them, much to the marines' consternation.

To Sean's eyes, the boy appeared to be about nine years old, small and spindly, with the large dark eyes and jet-black hair characteristic of so many Lebanese. He was assured, however, by a new member of his squad (a quick, nervous private first class from Indiana named Randy Colquitt) that Ibrahim was at least fourteen years of age. Randy had been temporarily transferred from his company to make up the losses Sean's had suffered in the bombing. It seemed the Corps was robbing Peter to pay Paul, as the unit that was supposed to relieve the marines currently on duty in Beirut had been diverted to a spot of trouble in someplace called Grenada.

"How d'ya know that?" Sean had inquired absently, while scanning the seemingly empty buildings in Hooterville. He had noticed several women cross an alleyway and enter one of them a few minutes before. They had all been draped in the traditional Muslim clothing. Sean thought they walked funny.

"Used to hang out in our AO. They say his parents were killed by the PLA . . . or the Shiites, or somebody."

Sean threw a look his way, then returned to scanning the blown-out windows across from their sandbagged position. "That right?" he asked laconically. "Why's that?"

Colquitt turned away and slid down into their hole with his back against the wall. In the midst of firing up a cigarette, he answered in a puzzled way, "Christians, I guess. That's what they say," he continued, blowing out a lungful of smoke. "I don't know."

Sean glanced once more at the Lebanese Army position. The kid had finished his dance and was looking in the marines' direction. He caught Sean looking at him. "Marines kick ass!" he shouted cheerfully in passable English, and waved.

Involuntarily, Sean waved back. The kid started their way. "Damn," Sean muttered. "That little bastard's comin' over here."

He rose up from his crouch to wave him off and caught a movement in the corner of his eye. He ducked so fast that he crashed

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into Colquitt and toppled him over onto his side. "What the—" the PFC spluttered.

Several shots rang out in rapid succession and Sean could hear them pinging off the street and the ricochets whining wildly away. The "women" had walked funny for a reason. He dared a peek over the side of their emplacement, and his mouth fell open.

The boy was doing his break-dancing routine in the middle of the street. It was generally agreed that the Shiites were terrible marksmen, but Sean knew from experience that what they lacked in accuracy they made up for in volume. Every second the kid delayed brought him closer to that lucky bullet.

"Lay down some fire on that position," Sean demanded. Colquitt reluctantly obeyed and began taking shots at the window. The fighters, who had doffed their previous attire, ducked away from the opening. One appeared to be clutching his throat.

"Good one," Sean said. "Keep it up!" He risked rising to a crouch and saw that the boy was now on his back spinning like a top, with his legs raised up in the air. "Get your ass in here, kid!" he shouted. The Lebanese soldiers had disappeared.

The boy leapt suddenly to his feet, even as he spun, and landed facing the militiamen's position, one arm raised defiantly in the air. From his small fist popped a middle finger. "You suck!" he assured the fighters, and then, with a grin at Sean, began a mad dash for the marines' bunker.

"Sonofabitch," Sean muttered unbelievingly. Then they opened up.

Sean had never seen so many flashes from so many windows in all his time in The Root. The sheer volume was deafening, and the whining of passing rounds was like being in a jar of wasps. The only problem was that they were all aimed at him as he stood slack-jawed watching the kid's race for safety. Colquitt snagged him by the belt and yanked him down into the hole. The firing ceased immediately, and moments later the kid vaulted the sandbags and landed, laughing and panting, amongst them.

"I do not believe you!" Sean gasped. "Kid, you've got some big ones."

"I guess," Colquitt agreed.

"What's your name?" he asked the panting youngster as he tossed him his canteen.

"Ibrahim," the boy informed him proudly, his black eyes sparking with excitement.

That evening when Sean arrived at work, Mr. Corrado was there going over register tapes. As he would often appear at unexpected times, Sean thought little of his appearance. He nodded to Sean as he hung up his jacket in the storeroom in his usual distracted manner, then returned to poring myopically over the tapes through the thick, dirty lenses of his glasses. Sean gently shoved

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the gym bag he had brought with him beneath a work counter with his foot.

"How's it goin'?" Sean asked pleasantly as he extracted his time-card from the holder on the wall.

"Good, Sean, good," Mr. Corrado mumbled in reply.

Sean slid his card into the time clock, then returned it to the holder. "That's good," he said as he headed for the storefront to relieve Megan.

"Oh, Sean," Corrado stopped him. "Just a minute . . . before you go out front."

Sean turned to his employer, curious. It was unlike him to engage in any but the most rudimentary conversations. He was not known for his "people skills."

"Listen, Sean, I'm sure you're aware that there's been a series of holdups in the area," he ventured.

Sean nodded. "Heard somethin', yeah."

"Well," Corrado glanced nervously towards the front counter and Megan. "I'm a little concerned, you see."

Sean felt his face growing hard. "Yeah," he offered unhelpfully.

Corrado ran a hand over the slick strands that failed to cover his gleaming pate, and Sean wondered, not for the first time, if there was some link between responsibility and baldness. It was something he had largely avoided since leaving the Corps twenty years before. "It seems they hit stores like ours," the nervous manager continued. "After midnight . . . your shift, that is." He glanced up at Sean as if for encouragement.

"And . . . ?" Sean inquired flatly.

"The thing is—" Corrado returned his gaze to the register tapes—"I'm thinking it might be wise to close at midnight . . . for a while . . . till they're caught."

"Closing all the stores, then?" Sean asked.

Corrado glanced back up, a stricken look on his face. "This one's a little different, Sean . . . you're so far out here, on the edge of town. It's exactly the kind of place they seem to hit. The others are closer in . . . a little less vulnerable," he added defensively.

"And I'm gonna pay the rent how?" Sean asked.

Corrado began to gather the tapes, as if to leave, but found that Sean was standing over him. "Sean, this would be for your own safety. Did you know a clerk at the Putnam chain was murdered just last night? That's less than five miles from here." He had never seen Sean like this.

Sean took a step back, sensing he was going too far. "Mr. Corrado, I cannot afford not to work, that's one thing. The other thing is that I don't like gettin' chased off my hill by a pack of maybes . . . maybe they'll hit us, maybe they won't. I stand to lose wages, and you stand to lose a lot of money in the bargain. If I'm willin' to take the chance, you oughta be, too." He took a breath and glanced

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out toward the front counter where Megan was staring at him impatiently and tapping her watch. "Mr. Corrado, you may not know this, but I was a marine once. I know how to take care of myself."

Corrado had not known that, and he studied Sean keenly for a moment before dropping his eyes. "I see," he said, slowly rising. "If that's how you feel, then. You make a good point."

Sean could see the relief flooding the other man's face. The responsibility was no longer his. "Thanks," Sean said, turning to relieve his coworker.

"But those lights out front, Sean," Corrado spoke with authority. "You've got to take care of those. Understood?"

"Understood," Sean agreed with a smile, and snapped a smart salute.

Corrado flinched, then hurried from the store as the witching hour struck.

From midnight until two A.M. customers came in the usual spates of hurried, exhausted-looking individuals in need of last-minute cigarettes, milk, coffee, chips, and beer. When at last Sean judged that he would have the store to himself, probably until the six A.M. coffee rush began, he hauled out the ladder from the storeroom and set to work on the lights. Maneuvering it carefully from one narrow aisle to the next, he loosened one fluorescent tube in each fixture, until the store was powered down to a drowsy twilight. After replacing the lights outside above the entry, he went out into the parking lot to judge the effect from the street, and was satisfied with the results. The store still gave the impression that it was open for business, but had acquired a tired, careless appearance. Just as importantly, it would not be as easy for a passerby, or the police, to see what was going on within—certain to be attractive to anyone who might be casing the place, he thought.

After loosening all of the light tubes in the fixture above the service counter and plunging his work area into a gloomy murk, he returned the ladder to the storeroom, only to return with a work lamp that he clamped onto a smokeless-tobacco display next to where he sat. He now had only to reach out and switch off the lamp to return his work area to near darkness. Without rising from his stool, he bent beneath the counter and retrieved the gym bag that he had brought out from the back room after Megan's and Mr. Corrado's departures.

There were two items within, the first being a very large and powerful hand-held spotlight of the type used by emergency personnel. He placed this, with a thump, upon the countertop and off to the side of his work space, but pointed directly at the entrance to the store. With a quick glance to ensure no customers were in the lot outside, he switched it on. The brilliant flash that reflected off the glass doors made him turn away with a curse, and he

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hastily switched it back off again. Anyone standing in front of him, he thought, would be similarly blinded.

The second item he removed from the bag he carefully placed on the shelf beneath the countertop, its cropped double barrels pointing directly forward. The stock of the gun had been cut down as well, and the pistol-like grip that remained was within easy reach of his hand.

The customer was just entering the store as Sean's eyes came up to the level of the countertop. He was a tall, emaciated-looking man in his middle thirties, Sean guessed, with a dirty baseball cap pulled low over his long, greasy locks. His face sprouted a drooping moustache and several days' growth of beard, and he started visibly when Sean popped up from behind the counter. "Wasn't sure anyone was home," he stuttered before changing direction and heading into the aisles. Sean noted that he kept one hand in the pocket of his frayed, oversized jacket.

"Nope, we're here," Sean replied. "That is, I'm here."

The man peered furtively over a display stand of factory-produced pastries as if to verify this information. Sean's hand rested lightly on the gun beneath the counter.

The customer returned to his study of packaged cakes and donuts.

"Need help with somethin'?" Sean offered pleasantly while scanning the parking lot for the man's car. He spotted it just at the edge of the lot, almost out of sight of the store's windows. The lights were off, but Sean thought he could make out two heads within, silhouetted by a distant street lamp. Was one of the occupants jumping up and down in his seat?

The man began to move and Sean's attention shifted away from the car and back to him. He had made a selection and was carrying the box in both hands. Sean relaxed somewhat and brought both his hands to the counter in order to scan the tasty sponge cakes packed with a creamy artificial filler. The man seemed unable to look at Sean, and his prominent Adam's apple bobbed alarmingly. He reeked of body odor, tobacco smoke, and a strange chemical smell.

"That it?" Sean asked as the fellow dug through his wallet.

"Yep," he answered, glancing back toward the door. "Open all night?"

"Yep," Sean answered back. "Just me."

"Uh-huh," the customer replied absently. He turned to leave, and had actually taken a few steps before remembering his purchase. "Damn," he said under his breath, turning to snatch the box from the counter and hurrying out into the parking lot.

Sean watched the man lope into the deeper darkness, and his hand returned once more to the gun. After a few moments, there was the faint sound of a car starting and Sean saw headlights blaze into life. The driver took the farther exit, so Sean was unable

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to see the other occupants of the car, but he did see the telltale white gleam of the broken tail lens.

Though the company commander had put the word out that fraternization with unvetted civilians was prohibited, this was generally more observed in the breach as it applied to Ibrahim. The boy had long been a mascot at the fringes of the marines' sprawling encampment within the airport, and as word spread of his display of bravura at CP 69, demand was high amongst the lower ranks for his company.

Demonstrating an appreciation of military politics far beyond his years, Ibrahim avoided the battalion and company command posts and officers in general, sticking to areas generally populated by the enlisted men. He could be counted upon to show up wherever the "grunts" were breaking open their "Meals Ready to Eat," or MREs as they were commonly called, to make a repast of the marines' donations. His high spirits, reputation for fearlessness, and vehement hatred of the shared enemy made him a welcome guest wherever he went.

Sean tried to discourage the boy from joining the marines at their combat posts, but he would have none of it. It seemed his bloodlust was equal to, or greater than, that of the Americans. When Sean asked him about this, he replied, "Pigs," and pointed over the berm into Hooterville.

Colquitt chimed in with his own observation. "Bet you'd like to have one of these, wouldn't ya?" He shook his M-16 at the boy, and Ibrahim made a lunge for it. Colquitt snatched it out of his grasp. "I guess," he observed quietly.

"You're Christian?" Sean asked the disappointed kid.

Ibrahim turned a hot gaze on the marine, then dug into his pocket. He thrust his fist out to Sean, then opened it to reveal an ornate silver cross on a chain cradled in his soiled palm.

"That's somethin'," Sean remarked. "How come you don't wear it?"

Ibrahim drew a forefinger across his throat and grimaced in answer.

"I guess," Colquitt said uneasily, casting a glance into Hooterville.

Sean, for the first time, thought of the boy making his way home to the Christian sector each night. "Big ones," he muttered.

That night, it was Colquitt's turn.

The evening had begun with the usual desultory and inaccurate bursts of fire from the 'ville. It appeared that the marines' determined response over the past few weeks had taken its toll on the militiamen, and for some time now, they appeared content to simply harass the Americans. Colquitt had just zeroed in on a fighter who foolishly kept returning to the same window when an uncharacteristically accurate burst of automatic fire from the street level

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tumbled him back down into the hole. Just like that, he was dead.

If Sean had been numb over the great slaughter that had befallen his fellow marines and miraculously spared him at the battalion command post, he was no longer. He did not weep for Colquitt, though the pain and grief he felt for the young man, whom he had known only a few short weeks, was a more piercing hurt than anything he had ever felt. In the loss of Colquitt he at last experienced the anguish of all that had gone before—the great hole in the earth that had swallowed the young men he had sweated with, cursed at, trained with, fought with, complained about, shared both boredom and terror with, now lay in his heart. The Corps did not have enough bullets for all he hoped to do.

The following night Sean returned to CP 69 with a powerful searchlight that he had stolen from one of the airport's warehouses. Friends in the motor pool had helped him rig it to a jeep battery that they had enthusiastically, and secretly, donated in support of his scheme, with the promise of more as needed.

Surprisingly, to Sean, his squad sergeant gave him a reluctant go-ahead, but promised to shut down this new enterprise the minute it went wrong. Sean assured him it would not.

Ibrahim was fascinated with the whole idea and could not stay away from the contraption, so Sean put him to work. "It's like this—" he explained to the excited youngster. "I'm gonna place the searchlight on top of the berm. You stay down in the hole with the battery. When I give you the word, you take this," and here he held up a cable with an alligator clamp on the end—"and attach it to this," and pointed to the positive terminal on the battery. "Got it?"

Ibrahim nodded his head and grinned. "Got it," he promised.

Sean waited until it was completely dark and the flashes of the AK-47 muzzles could be clearly seen before he put things into action. Selecting a particularly persistent nest of snipers, he swiveled the light until he felt he had a pretty good line on the shooters, then called down to Ibrahim, "Do it!"

The brilliance of the beam threw the entire side of the building it was aimed at into relief, each brick suddenly separate from the others in detail. The shooters were caught like moths pinned to velvet, their hands flying up to their eyes with a cry, their weapons clattering to the rubble-strewn floor of their position. Sean, situated well away from the light, wasted no time; he took both out with a controlled burst of fire, and then launched a grenade from his M-203 that finished whoever remained hidden within the room. "Kill the light," he called out to Ibrahim. The building returned to darkness as the members of Sean's squad scuttled up to slap him on the back and offer their heartfelt congratulations. Sean ruffled Ibrahim's tousled head affectionately. "We got some," he said to the boy.

"Get some more," Ibrahim responded, his white teeth visible even

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in the gloom of the bunker, though it did not look like a smile.

The rest of the night was more of the same, and Sean's body-count was becoming the stuff of marine legend. It seemed to Sean that the militiamen were slow learners.

The next evening proved otherwise.

Sean and his section had no sooner relieved the combat post when they came under intense and accurate fire. It seemed that as quickly as they shifted from one fighting position and began to return fire, they would be driven to another. Neither camouflage nor darkness proved a deterrent, and Sean was unable to place his search lamp on the berm for fear of the enemy's newfound marksmanship. He wondered morosely if the Syrian Army had directly entered the fray at last. They lost one killed and two wounded.

At dawn, after the Shiite fighters had melted away and Sean's unit was being relieved in its place, Ibrahim bid his farewells and glided warily away to wherever it was that he called home. Sean glared resentfully at the destroyed buildings that grinned back like a mouthful of broken teeth, and cursed. Something had changed, just when things were going his way, and he couldn't understand why. He shouldered his weapon and turned to leave, then noticed something about twenty yards out.

Cans. Ordinarily, he would have paid no attention to any of the debris or garbage that lay strewn between CP 69 and Hooterville, but one can in particular had caught his attention. It appeared to be a gallon paint container that lay empty on its side, an errant bullet having punched through it and rolled it over. One side was coated with a greenish fluorescent paint. The paint reminded Sean of the kind the Americans used to dot tent pegs and other small, necessary objects so they could find them in the dark. He began walking towards it into no-man's land. Several voices were raised in alarm at his back and he called out over his shoulder, "Cover me." Even the bad guys had to sleep, Sean thought, though he really didn't care.

Looking down at the battered can, he was sure it was the same kind of paint they kept stored within the marine compound. He lifted his gaze to CP 69. From the can to the spot where he had placed the searchlight the previous night was a straight line. He looked from right to left. A series of cans, of all sizes and roughly aligned, stretched away in both directions, and seen from this side, each was painted a fluorescent green. Sean strode to each can, turned, and looked back at the marines' bunker complex. Each marked a prepared fighting position that could easily be targeted with the use of these glow-in-the-dark aiming stakes. Sean heard his sergeant bellowing for him to get back behind the line.

Turning his back to Hooterville, he selected a smallish can that had possibly contained soup in gentler times, and tipped it over. Being careful to keep his actions from being seen by interested eyes in the 'ville, he slipped a hand grenade from his vest, pulled

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the pin while keeping pressure on the spoon, and slid it cautiously into the empty can. It was a good fit. He left that can on its side and walked away, kicking over a few others at random before returning to his unit. Sean was satisfied that whoever had set them up would be convinced that their disarray was the natural result of the previous evening's firefight. Undoubtedly, he would want to repair his handiwork.

Sean had briefed his squad on his discovery, and when they returned that night they were in a high state of excitement. They quickly settled in to await the unfolding of events.

Less than an hour into their vigil, the word came down the line that someone was moving out front and to the right of their position. Every head swiveled in that direction, eyes and ears straining. Sean thought he heard the scrape of metal against a rough surface, but could see nothing. Based on the noise, he calculated that their visitor was roughly two overturned cans away from Sean's surprise. A few moments passed in deathly silence. It seemed the marines were holding their breath as one. Then, another faint scrape of metal. Silence returned, and held this time even longer than the last.

"Sonofabitch," Sean said under his breath. "Get on with it!"

At last, Sean was rewarded with a repetition of the previous sound. Obviously, their visitor was checking each of his ad hoc aiming stakes with great diligence. He was one cool customer, Sean thought.

Then nothing. Minutes of nothing. Sean began to become alarmed that somehow his invisible antagonist had gotten wise to the booby trap that lay next in line. Sweat was running freely now beneath the collar of his flak jacket. Still there was nothing. No sound, no scrape of metal followed closely by an explosion. Nothing.

He looked wildly about for Ibrahim, but couldn't locate him in the trenches. Instead, he grabbed one of his fellow squad members and told him to stand by the battery. Sean hoisted the searchlight up on top of the sandbags. "We can't wait," Sean whispered harshly to the squad. "When I hit the light, fire 'em up!"

Sean brought his own rifle up to his shoulder, then called softly to the man on the battery, "On three. One, two . . ." He adjusted his aim to where he remembered the rigged can to be. "Three!"

Ibrahim was revealed as a chalky statue, frozen in the act of betrayal. Even as his arm flew up to shield his eyes, the can he was holding dumped its deadly contents onto the earth at his feet, the spoon flying away and setting in motion the three seconds remaining that he had to live. In those moments, an eternity to Sean, the little militiaman had just time to recognize his peril before looking straight into the faces of the marines. In the unforgiving illumination his eyes were as black as obsidian and glitter-

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ing with defiant malice. He thrust his thin arm into the air, but did not have time to complete his signature salute.

When the tall man in the baseball cap reentered the store, Sean's head snapped up from his chest, and he realized that he had been caught napping. His head felt swollen with woolly, disparate images; his limbs heavy and spellbound. There were three of them now. Obviously, they had just entered the store, as they stood close together at the doorway looking back at him. They could have been posing for a family photograph, Sean mused, even as he fumbled clumsily for the stock of the gun and switched off the lamp that shone down on him. They were not what he had expected.

He reached for the switch on the spotlight, then hesitated. The man and his bedraggled mate appeared to be urging the boy to approach Sean, whispering in his ear and gently shoving him forward. Sean was reminded of himself at that age, reluctant, yet eager, his parents coaxing him to sit on the mall Santa's lap.

The boy began his hesitant approach, his eyes on his dirty, scuffed sneakers. His parents, if that's what they were, drifted into the aisles on either side, peering anxiously over the display cases as they barely pretended to be shopping. Sean watched mesmerized as the child shuffled forward. Was he being sent to beg, Sean wondered? His finger rested on the double trigger.

At last, the boy reached the counter, the top of his shaggy head barely on a level with it. Sean glanced quickly around the store at the man and woman, who continued to play their bizarre and obvious game of peekaboo. The boy remained immobile, looking down at his shoes, even as he tugged at something in the pocket of his shabby hooded pullover.

Sean felt the unreality of his situation, even as he debated inwardly the reality of the events unfolding before him. He determined that he must speak, say something to break the spell. "Mister," he croaked, his throat choked with sleep, "is there somethin' your boy . . ."

The gun the boy brought forth from his parka was a .25-caliber, just as Sergeant Fullerton had said, a ladies' gun that fit just as well in the hand of a child. As the boy's arm extended to its full length, Sean understood that the bullet that would issue from it would exactly duplicate the trajectory the good sergeant had so graphically demonstrated.

Sean knew that if he pulled the triggers his finger lay curled around, he would unleash a deadly hail of buckshot that would surely pierce the thin plywood partition that separated the boy from this world and the next. He hesitated only long enough to look into the boy's eyes, eyes that danced and sparked with triumphant, inexplicable hatred—Ibrahim's eyes; then, with a tired sigh, he relaxed his grip on the triggers. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

AN INTERNAL COMPLAINT

by Art Taylor

And Anna Sergeyevna began coming to see Gurov in Moscow. Once in two or three months she left S——, telling her husband that she was going to consult a doctor about an internal complaint—and her husband believed her, and didn't believe her. In Moscow she stayed at the Slaviansky Bazaar hotel, and at once sent a man in a red cap to Gurov. Gurov went to see her, and no one in Moscow knew of it.

—Anton Chekhov, "The Lady With the Dog"

Philip turned tired eyes once more to his notebook: passages from Chekhov's story copied verbatim in his own handwriting, notes penned in red ink all around the margins. What had begun as an exercise (hone craft by analyzing the master, reading *is* writing) had gradually sparked a passion in him, something he hadn't quite felt with the stories he'd tried to write before, had never felt in front of a classroom of dull gazes. *In only one sentence Chekhov hints at husband's point of view,* Philip had written early on, *"believed her, didn't believe her,"* and then the words that had set the whole process in motion: *A story of its own there?* Throughout, the red ink threatened to overwhelm the black, staining his skin when the pen had bled on his fingers.

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A writer who was first published in our Department of First Stories, Art Taylor has gone on to sell fiction to the *North Carolina Literary Review*, and the *North American Review* (where he was a finalist for the Kurt Vonnegut Fiction Prize). He's an assistant professor of English at George Mason University and an occasional reviewer for the *Washington Post*. ¶

An entire page of clues and conjectures about the husband: *Surname p. 574 is Von Diderits. . . . First name not given: perhaps Aloysha, Evgeniy (nickname Zhenya), Gavril, Piotr. . . . Crown Department or Provincial Government? Anna does not know. Check* Britannica *for background. . . . How large is their house? How many servants?* Elsewhere he'd jotted, *Anna's "internal complaint" intended as double entendre?* And on another page, a chronology of the story's scenes: Yalta where Anna and Gurov meet; the city of S— where *The Geisha* premieres; Moscow where the affair continues. . . .

As he stared at the words and figures, Philip's mind raced to pull the pieces, the possibilities, together. He could write this. This was the one, he knew it.

"So, how are things with the Russians?"

Catherine's voice, behind him. How long had she been in the room? Philip detected a floral scent and hints of fruit—pears, perhaps? Grapes? She couldn't have been standing there long, or he would have noticed it—unlike his wife to wear perfume. She usually smelled of finger paints and crayons, carried home from the art classes she taught at Ligon. He hooked his pen through the top of the clipboard, closed his eyes, and inhaled slowly. Grapes, definitely.

"It's so dark in here," she said, and he felt her hands on his shoulders. "But I'll bet you haven't even noticed."

"I hadn't really." He opened his eyes again. Except for the glow of the computer screen—Britannica.com—the only light came from the mica-shade lamp on the desk, shining down on the open copy of Chekhov. Through the window, he saw that the sun had gone down and the night was pitch black, and he was reminded of Chekhov's counsel: *Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on the broken glass.* The window sill was steeped in shadows from the streetlight. A blur of buds bloomed on the bush beyond. Still, no moon. The CD had run out as well—how long before, he didn't know. Monk, he'd been listening to. "In Walked Bud," "'Round Midnight," "Evidence."

"But the Russians are good." He leaned his head forward as she kneaded his shoulders. "Or at least the one I'm working with. It'll be a good story when I'm done, I just feel it. But I'm really still

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just making notes. Looking for the key into the whole thing."

"But you've been in here for hours."

"Oh, it couldn't have been that long," he said. "After all, what time did we have dinner?"

She laughed. "*I* ate some leftover pizza about a half-hour ago," she said. "But unless you have a stash of food in here . . ." And she was right. He couldn't remember having eaten.

"Oh, well," he shrugged. She stopped touching him.

"Well, try to eat something. I'm going out for a while."

"Anyplace special?" he asked, turning in his chair to see her. She wore a bandana print skirt, sleeveless denim top. Black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Scant light came from elsewhere in the house through the open doorway behind her, falling lightly on the edge of the bookcase, a pile of mail, the guest bed that shared this room. Catherine herself was caught half-in, half-out of the mica-tinted glow, and he tried to think what word she might be: not *luminous;* not *scintillant . . . evanescent?*

"I don't know," she said. "Target, maybe? We don't really need anything, but I'm just feeling a little restless tonight. Just want to get out." The top edge of her face was shadowed (he knew this word: *chiaroscuro;* she had been *captured* in *chiaroscuro*), but from the turn of her chin, he imagined that her brow must have furrowed. "I may stop by Borders afterwards, flip through some magazines, get a cup of coffee. Maybe pick up a new book for the kids at school. They stay open pretty late, right?"

He nodded. "New perfume?"

"It's French," she said. "Annick Goutal. It's called 'Ce Soir Ou Jamais.' The woman at Belk's described it as Turkish rose gardens, wildflowers, and black currants. You like?"

Black currants. He hadn't been far off with grapes.

"I feel . . . *enthralled,*" he said, grinning. "Fragrance is a seductive thing."

She leaned over to kiss his forehead. "I left a couple of pieces of that pizza for you in the microwave," she whispered. "Don't forget them." And then she was gone.

Her scent lingered in the air as he picked up his pen, and for a moment he was unable to remember where he had been in his notes. Then, turning a new thought over in his mind, turning the key he had found, he once more began to write: *Fragrance is a significant thing.*

Evgeniy von Diderits enjoyed his breakfasts with enthusiasm. He savored the smell of frying dough almost as much as the vareniki themselves, plump with eggs and cheese or tucked tight with minced mutton—the latter his own twist on tradition. He liked dipping his curly sausages in black currant jam, and after he finished his meal, he liked to swirl a dollop of that same jam into his

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tea as well. As the cup cooled, he stroked his small side-whiskers or caressed the tips of his nostril hair, reading yesterday's edition of the *Kiev Telegraph* and thinking eagerly about the meetings scheduled for the day ahead. In the shadow of a good breakfast, with his wife seated just across the table and the servants bustling through their morning duties, Evgeniy believed briefly, firmly, that little could disturb the world he had created for himself and his wife—indeed, for the entire village of S——.

"I am going to Moscow today," said Anna Sergeyevna. "I think I told you. For a few days. I will be taking the morning train at eleven."

Von Diderits looked up from his paper. His wife stared dully out the window, her fair hair pinned against her head, her breakfast plate nearly untouched. He did not speak, waiting for her to turn her gray eyes back his way.

"Your food has gotten cold," he said finally, when she failed to look at him.

"I'm not hungry," she replied. "I don't feel well."

"Is it your . . . Is it the 'internal complaint' again?" he asked, and the phrase became bitter in his mouth, tainting the sweet aftertaste of his meal.

Anna Sergeyevna gave a slow nod.

"You know," he continued, his voice even, unperturbed, "we have very good doctors here as well. That is part of my responsibility, the responsibility of my committee on the zemstvo, to ensure the presence of excellent doctors here. Perhaps they are not as plentiful as they are in Moscow, but they are well trained and eager to help." They had traveled this path before—as many times now as the number of trips she had made to Moscow—and both of them knew the way. "I am happy to arrange an appointment for you."

"Zhenya," she said, his nickname a plaintive sigh, and Evgeniy at once resented her pleading, pitying tone. But before he could speak, one of the servants came in to clear more plates. The couple remained silent while the young scullion tidied the table, and after the girl left, Anna Sergeyevna once more assumed a firmer tone. "I have already made an appointment in Moscow," she said, "with the doctor I have consulted there. He already knows my situation. I trust him."

"And yet despite your trust in him, your many visits have not alleviated this internal distress, am I correct?" He smiled broadly. "Perhaps you should trust me instead this time?"

"I have already made the appointment," she explained again, not raising her voice. "I have already purchased my ticket. I have telegraphed Petersburg as well. My sister is meeting me in Moscow. We have made plans to attend the theater."

"Your sister . . ." began Von Diderits, thinking of the questions he could ask next—*What time will your sister's train be arriving?*

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What play will you be seeing? Which day?—and of the requests that he would make upon her return: *I have read about that play; remind me about the story.* And: *Where did you dine in Moscow? I have eaten there myself; did you speak with Taraykin?* She always had the correct answers, delivered without hesitation. When he checked the timetables later, he would find that the Petersburg train was in fact scheduled to arrive at the time she had said. There had indeed been a performance of *La Corsaire* at the Bolshoi or *Dyadya Vanya* at the Art Theatre. No, she had not seen Taraykin at the Prague (so there was no way for him to confirm who had accompanied her), but she had ridden the new electric tram from Strastnaya Square to Petrovsky Park—an unverifiable, and therefore useless, detail.

Evgeniy closed his paper, rose from his seat. Walking around the table, he stood over her. "Very well," he said, believing, not believing. "You may go."

He leaned down to kiss her cheek, and past the dense smell of sausage still permeating the room, he discovered, as he had dreaded, the odor of jasmine and bergamot behind her ears and around her neck. Novaya Zarya, he knew, the scent that he'd bought her at the parfumerie on Nevsky Street during one of his own trips to Moscow—and he despaired to think that she now wore it only when she was making the same contemptible journey herself. . . .

The scene had taken Philip days to write, drafting, revising, erasing completely—more nights spent working at the computer, as furiously as ever, his "key" into the story only unlocking more questions. Now another sunset approached, Catherine out yet another evening, dinner with friends this time, a long evening ahead.

Philip penned a question mark over the word *contemptible.* Would Chekhov really have used the word in such a context? Or anything so bald as *despaired,* except in dialogue? And the problem wasn't just the individual words but the whole approach. The details smacked of too much research. Chekhov himself would have called it "the newspaper," not the *Kiev Telegraph.* He would not have bothered with the names of restaurants or the brand name of the perfume. The reference to *Dyadya Vanya* was too self-consciously clever. And Chekhov would have crafted the entire exchange with more subtlety, kept the emotions even more restrained. "When you want to touch a reader's heart, try to be colder," Chekhov had written in one of his letters. "It gives their grief, as it were, a background against which it stands out in greater relief."

Evgeniy leaned down to kiss his wife's cheek, and discovered the odor of jasmine and bergamot behind her ears and around her

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neck. He recognized it as the perfume that he'd bought her on one of his trips to Moscow, and he knew that she wore it now only when making the same journey herself.

The doorbell rang—just past seven P.M. One of the neighbors? A door-to-door salesman perhaps? Their friends rarely dropped by unannounced.

Philip leaned over to glance out the window. A green Land Rover sat by the front curb—not a vehicle he recognized. He turned back to his notes, waiting for the person to go away.

The doorbell rang again, the person pressing longer on the button. *Insistent,* thought Philip. *Or is it* per*sistent?* Persistently? He laid down his pen and got up, then grabbed his copy of Chekhov and stuck his finger between the pages as he stepped into the living room. The detail would let his visitor know that he'd been interrupted. Through the window inset into the front door, he saw a man's head in profile, cocked back at the neck. The stranger's lips were pursed as he blew a stream of smoke into the air.

"Can I help you?" Philip asked, opening the door only enough to lean out.

"Hi," said the man on the porch. He shifted his cigarette to his left hand and held out the right. "You must be Philip."

The man stood slightly taller than Philip, trim and athletic. Tanned or, rather, ruddy—his red hair made him ruddy. One too many buttons loosened on the front of his Oxford, the hair thick on his chest. With the Land Rover framed above his shoulder, he looked like a commercial, but for what, Philip wasn't sure.

"Do we know each other?" Philip asked, opening the door wider and reaching his free hand out.

"No, I don't think we've met," the man said. Shake, release. "I'm a friend of Catherine's. Buddy Shelton—well, Robert, really, I'm trying to get back to Robert, but back in college it was Buddy, so . . ." He laughed lightly. "Didn't Catherine mention I was coming by?"

"Catherine's not here. She's gone out to dinner with some friends."

Buddy smiled. "Well, I guess that would be me." Cigarette to the mouth. A deep drag. He shook his head slightly, blew the smoke out of the corner of his mouth. "I'm sorry to have bothered you. I must have misunderstood about where we were going to meet. I thought we were all getting together here first."

They were meeting several classmates from school, Buddy explained. He had just moved back to Raleigh recently, rented a house over in Vanguard Park. He was in pharmaceutical sales, and the Triangle ". . . well, it's about the capital of the world for that, you know. You're teaching at State, right?"

"Close," Philip said. "Wake Tech."

"Gotta start somewhere." Buddy shrugged. "And I guess it gives you plenty of time to write, huh?" It was nice to be back in the

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area in general, he went on. It hadn't taken him long to run into some friends from school, and the next thing you know plans were being made. "Of course, it's just like me to get the plans wrong somehow." Buddy laughed, but Philip detected no real lapse of confidence. What was the connection between *self-effacing* and *self-assured*? Philip assumed it just depended on the *self* involved.

"Well, nice meeting you," Buddy said, stepping off the porch. "Guess I'll just try to catch up with everyone." Then halfway across the yard, with a quick turn, walking backward for a moment: "Hey, wanna join us?"

"No, I've—" Philip started to hold up his book and explain that he was working, or protest that he was only wearing a T-shirt, shorts, and sandals, but then realized that he wasn't expected to say yes. Buddy had never even stopped walking. "No," Philip called after him. "You all have a good time."

"Oh, I'm sure we will," said Buddy, and he thumbed the cigarette butt into the street as he climbed in the truck. A wave from the window as he rounded the curve.

Philip started to turn back inside, but instead walked out and sat for a while on the porch swing he and Catherine had only recently found time to install. Soon the sun would go down, and even now there were few people on the street—a pair of joggers, a couple pushing a stroller, a bicyclist in Spandex shorts. The chains supporting the swing creaked, the grass in the yard had begun to wither, paint peeled on the perimeter of the porch—little chores neglected. From somewhere in the neighborhood came the dull, distant roar of a lawnmower, or perhaps a hedge trimmer. Philip's thoughts wandered back over the conversation with Buddy, and he found himself troubled by the cigarette butt in the middle of the street. The joggers, the couple with the stroller, the cyclist—none of them seemed to notice it. Finally, he walked out to pick it up, deposited it in the trashcan on the side of the house, and then came back to the porch. He opened up the Chekhov collection.

The theater scene in S——. Gurov and Anna rushing away from the crowds at intermission. They walked *senselessly along passages, and up and down stairs,* came to rest on a *narrow, gloomy staircase.*

"I am so unhappy," she went on, not heeding him. "I have thought of nothing but you all the time; I live only in the thought of you. And I wanted to forget, to forget you, but why, oh, why have you come?"

On the landing above them two schoolboys were smoking and looking down . . . Gurov drew Anna Sergeyevna to him, and began kissing her face, her cheeks, and her hands.

"What are you doing, what are you doing? . . . I beseech you by all that is sacred, I implore you. . . . There are people coming this way!"

Someone was coming up the stairs. . . .

Philip closed the book in mid scene, bothered as always that the "someone" never arrived. Who *was* that someone? And why had he

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or she stopped? A similar event in Yalta—Anna and Gurov sitting at breakfast: *A man walked up to them . . . looked at them and walked away. And this detail seemed mysterious and beautiful, too.* But what more did the detail signify? What did Chekhov intend? Simply some reminder of the outside world barging in, ever-threatening to discover the affair? And how early would Von Diderits himself have known that his marriage had gone terribly wrong?

Evgeniy shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Anna Sergeyevna glanced toward him, away from the stage, her furrowed brow asking, *Is there something wrong?* He smiled and shook his head, patted her knee. His wife smiled in response before turning her attention back to the scene before them—the Tea House of Ten Thousand Joys. A parade of kimonoed figures with thickly powdered faces danced in unison, strummed lutes, poured tea for lounging British sailors. Evgeniy's wife tapped the tip of her fan against the bridge of her lorgnette, the latter a trifle he had bought her—unnecessary since their regular stall was on the third row, but she was always pleased by such precious accessories. "Men make love the same in all countries," the Frenchwoman on stage had said. "There is only one language for love." And when the wizened Wun-Hi replied, with those troubled r's, "Yes, me know—good language before malliage, after malliage, bad language," everyone laughed.

Evgeniy had paid little mind to the plot—a stew of misguided passions, flirtations, jealousy . . . a song about a goldfish. It was easy enough to let one's attention wander.

> And ever as my samisen I play
> Come lovers at my pretty feet to fall,
> Who fancy—till I bid them run away—
> A geisha's heart has room enough for all!
>
> Yet love may work his will, if so he please;
> His magic can a woman's heart unlock
> As well beneath kimono Japanese
> As under any smart Parisian frock.

Evgeniy turned his eyes once more toward the governor's box, but still saw no one but the governor's daughter seated in front, leaning forward, her elbows on the coping. He had nodded in the direction of the box during the bustle before the start of the play, aware from the parting of the curtains behind her and the partially glimpsed hand on the sash that the governor himself stood back there watching—that perhaps the governor had in turn seen him. Evgeniy hoped that at the interval between acts he would have the opportunity to speak with the man. There seemed little harm in reminding a superior that you were there, that you existed at all.

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At last the first act ended. The curtain fell.

"Excuse me, my darling," Evgeniy said, standing. "There are several people I must speak with." And he stooped over quickly to kiss his wife's cheek before leaving her in the stall, proud that everyone could see what a model marriage they had. She was indeed his darling, his plum, his precious baby bird. In the aisle, he encountered Pyotr Alexeitch, and the two men began speaking as they walked toward the door outside, where several other gentlemen had already gathered to smoke.

But he had barely caught the smell of tobacco drifting through the door when a brisk movement across the room seized his attention—a woman rushing hurriedly through the crowd. A mere flash of a moment, but enough for him to recognize his wife's gown, the particular way she pinned her hair back, and that familiar, though now hurried, gait. Had a problem arisen? Perhaps she had suddenly taken ill. Was she searching for him?

"I beg your pardon, Pyotr," he said, with a slight bow. "I fear there is something I must attend to." It was, he considered, no breach of manners to look to your wife in her time of need.

He walked through the laughing, chattering crowd, heard a person humming one of the refrains from the play, saw another stifling a giggle as she stiffly mimicked the bow of one of the geisha girls.

His wife had gone through this door, surely, he thought, and it opened up onto a busy passageway leading around the auditorium. A glimpse of her gown to the right, and as Evgeniy moved in that direction, he saw that another man was following closely on his wife's heels.

"Excuse me," he said to each person whose elbow he jostled, "pardon me." He eased as swiftly as he could through the crowd without disrupting them too terribly, without drawing too much attention—casting a quick smile or a friendly nod to those he knew, striving at the same time to keep his eyes on the figures ahead. They seemed to move endlessly along passageways, and up and down stairs. At times Evgeniy gained on them, at others he fell behind, until at a last turn he reached the base of a narrow, gloomy staircase, hidden from the crowd. The sounds of his wife's voice echoed down the stairs—"I beseech you by all that is sacred, I implore you"—and Evgeniy mounted the first step hastily, primed to defend his wife's virtue, his own honor, until he heard an unexpected tenor in her next words: "There are people coming this way!"

He stopped in mid step. There was an urgency in her tone that had struck him strangely, a desperation, a passion, a—

"You must go away. . . . I will come and see you in Moscow. I have never been happy; I am miserable now. . . . I swear I'll come to Moscow. But now let us part. My precious, good, dear one, we must part!"

A moment passed in silence, an emptiness in which Evgeniy's

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imagination trembled. Then he heard them coming down the stairs rapidly, and he slunk back along the passageways ahead of them, once more fighting the throng as he struggled toward the security of their accustomed stall.

Near midnight, Philip sat alone in the living room, his gaze wandering from one object to another. The weave of the fabric on the couch, marred by a stain whose origin he couldn't remember. The air-conditioning vent in the corner, rattling intermittently as the system switched on and off. Over the mantel hung an abstract painting that Catherine had completed in college: two broad, bold, S-shaped swaths of color, red and purple. Divergent at each extreme, they curved closer together in the middle and touched lightly at various points. What was the name of it? *Duet* something? *Romance? Romantic Red Pairs Passionate Purple?* There was a precious cleverness to the title, Philip recalled, but his mind was too muddled to remember it clearly. Densely chaotic jazz murmured from the stereo's speakers, the volume turned low so as not to disturb Catherine's sleep.

They had kissed soon before he left their bed a half-hour before, and her lips had tingled at the time with the mint of her toothpaste, masking the faint aftertaste of her evening out. But now it was the undertones of those tastes that lingered in his memory. The briny lure of tequila, the tang of limes. Residues, castoffs. Like the bracelet she had discarded on the end table when she walked through the door, or the pocketbook standing like a challenge on the other chair.

"Did your friend Robert find you?" he had asked her after she came home.

"Robert?" she said. "Oh, you mean Buddy. Why? Did he call here?"

"He stopped by looking for you. He assumed you were meeting here first before dinner."

"I wonder why he would have thought that," she said, and he thought she seemed genuinely puzzled. No, he hadn't mentioned stopping by, she went on to explain, had just apologized for being late when he got there and joined them at the table. How many others? Oh, five or six—let's see . . . Miriam and Alex, Ken, Alice, Lucy . . . Buddy, of course. So how many is that? Six? Seven, including Catherine. Lucky number seven. "You know, just a bunch of us who'd been together back in school."

"Sounds like fun," Philip had said, and in his mind now he emptied out the pocketbook sitting across from him: lipstick and powder, several Kleenex, her wallet, a tampon, her cell phone, her Palm Pilot.

"Excuse me," Evgeniy said to each person whose elbow he jostled, "pardon me." He moved as swiftly as he could through the crowd without disrupting them too terribly, without drawing too much attention—struggling to cast a quick smile or a friendly nod to

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those he knew, to maintain some equilibrium.

"Well, it's great that you got the chance to catch up with him," Philip had gone on. "Good that Buddy's turned up here in town."

"It really is nice," Catherine said. "I'd forgotten how much I missed him."

"How long has it been since you last saw him?"

Years and years ago, she replied. They had been such good friends when they were in school—had taken several classes together, gone out to the same clubs. But once graduation came, so many people headed their separate ways. Buddy had moved out to the West Coast, to Sacramento—a job he couldn't refuse. Catherine had promised to come out and visit, had really meant to. She hadn't been particularly pleased with her own job then. She'd felt aimless, unambitious . . . unhappy, really.

I will come and see you in Sacramento. I have never been happy; I am miserable now. I have thought of nothing but you all the time; I live only in the thought of you. . . .

"But I never went out to see him," she said. "Eventually, each of us got so busy. I got the job at Ligon. We stopped calling each other as often as we had. . . . You know how easy it is to lose touch."

Soon, Catherine had prepared to go to sleep—removed her makeup, brushed her teeth, pulled on a pair of his boxers. By the time Philip joined her, she had already settled between the sheets, was nearly asleep. He turned out the light and felt his way into the bed, recognizing in the darkness the scent of the new perfume he'd first noticed several nights before. She leaned over. A kiss. Lips redolent with mint, the taste lingering as she pulled away. They lay for a while in the half-darkness together, in the glow of the streetlight through the window, under the faint outline of the ceiling fan overhead. Philip tried to catch the dim sound of its motor spinning amidst the silence.

"Did you ever . . ." he finally asked her, ". . . you know. I mean, with your friend Buddy?"

A long pause. His imagination trembled. "You men," she said after a few seconds, "the way you . . ." and he heard the hint of a low chuckle. A long sigh followed. "Once or twice," she said finally. "It was back in college. It was years ago."

"Excuse me," Evgeniy said to each person whose elbow he jostled, "pardon me." He moved as swiftly as he could through the crowd without disrupting them too terribly, without drawing too much attention. Surely what he'd seen wasn't what it seemed. Surely the man following his wife wasn't . . . Surely the man from Yalta wouldn't dare to . . . Evgeniy had been able to excuse that indiscretion, an isolated mistake, but he could not condone this, not abide such, not here in his own town. No, this was untenable, this was . . .

They didn't speak after that, and soon Catherine's breathing settled into a regular pattern. He listened to her for a few minutes,

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then realized he would be unable to sleep himself. He went downstairs, put on the Ornette Coleman CD, and sat down on the sofa to stare at the air-conditioning vent and the painting over the mantel and the pocketbook on the chair with her Palm Pilot within.

What was the name of that painting? he asked himself again, and this time it came to him, a conversation years ago, emerging from some tucked-away place in his memory. *Twin Passions Twined,* she'd called it, remarking to Philip that it was like them, wasn't it? like love *should* be? She wrapped her arms around him in the memory, they kissed, they . . . but no comfort in remembering that embrace tonight. Other thoughts intruded. She'd actually painted it in college, hadn't she? And who had the purple swath represented for her then? What had she written down in her Palm Pilot for tonight—"Dinner w/friends"? "Dinner w/Miriam, Alex, etc."? "Dinner with Buddy"? What was listed for the evening a few nights back when she had claimed she was going to Target and Borders?

It was at the theater that Evgeniy first saw Gurov with his own eyes, but this was not his first awareness of the other man, despite his many attempts to suppress that knowledge. Looking back over all that had happened, Evgeniy realized that he had likely already lost Anna in Yalta, or even before, and he was ashamed to have arranged a witness to his own humiliation.

Yalta was his wife's first holiday in the two years since they had been married. She had grown up in Petersburg, and he knew that moving to the provinces had been an adjustment for her. He had sensed that she was sometimes restless with their surroundings, restless with the days that he spent away from her while at council and the evenings he spent building relationships to ensure a successful career. He imagined her staring all day at the gray fence opposite the house, or chasing idly after that pesky little dog she loved so, and he felt responsible for the drabness he had begun to see in her eyes.

"Why don't you take a trip, my darling?" he had asked her one evening when she complained of not feeling well. "A change of scenery will invigorate your spirits. You could travel to Moscow, maybe, or to Petersburg to see your sister. Or someplace new. To Yalta, perhaps. You might enjoy some time at the coast. You can stay for two weeks or a month or even more." And though she had been hesitant at first, she had eventually acquiesced. A trip was planned for late summer. She bought some clothes for her journey, a new beret, a new parasol as well. Even the preparations seemed to return some glimmer of light to her soft gray eyes, and Evgeniy felt his own spirits relieved as well. At the end of her stay at the coast, he might come down personally to fetch her. They could spend a few days together. It would be a second honeymoon.

The week before her trip, he had summoned Zhmuhin, the hotel

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porter, to his office. Evgeniy found Zhmuhin a despicable person in many ways. The man was gaunt and angular, with a bent nose, and Evgeniy had often sensed something smug and sneering beneath his show of truckling diffidence. Plus, Zhmuhin perennially mispronounced Evgeniy's surname as "Dridirit"—intentionally, Evgeniy believed. But Zhmuhin also possessed the keen eye and discretion necessary for his post. He was precise in his tallying of new arrivals to and departures from the town, encompassing in his recognition of small details. It had even been rumored years before that Zhmuhin was an outside agent for the Okhrana, the imperial police, and though the idea had quickly been dismissed, Evgeniy had often wondered at the possibility and as a result continued to cultivate some familiarity with the other man. As if recognizing this, Zhmuhin sometimes dropped his pretensions around Evgeniy, and too often took advantage of being treated as an equal.

After the porter had settled into one of the wing chairs opposite the mahogany desk, Evgeniy offered him a glass of cognac, asked him about who had checked in most recently at the hotel, laughed that Zhmuhin was always at the hotel, always so much work, and didn't he ever need a holiday? And when Zhmuhin replied that he arranged to go to Petersburg each May and November, the former in honor of the emperor's birthday and the latter to commemorate the dowager empress, Evgeniy commented that such respect was very noble, wondering beneath his words if the man's trips to the capital might have more to do with some duties for the secret police.

"But perhaps you would also like to take another type of holiday, and sooner," continued Evgeniy. "Perhaps somewhere warmer, perhaps to a coastal climate? Perhaps to Yalta?"

A sly smile emerged at one corner of Zhmuhin's lips. "And why would I choose to go to Yalta?" he asked, tugging at the lapels of his gray porter's uniform. "Is there some specific reason for such a trip?"

"I have always said that you are a clever man," replied Evgeniy. "That you are intelligent beyond your position, and such you are." He gestured as if doffing a hat to the porter, though he wore no hat at the time. "You are correct. It is my wife. I have decided to send her to Yalta for a holiday herself, and I would like for you to go as well."

Zhmuhin's smile vanished. "That sounds little like a holiday, Mr. Dridirit," he replied, enunciating the last word. "To carry bags and open doors. I can do these things here. And you yourself have servants for such tasks. Send them along instead." He started to rise.

"You misunderstand. Please sit, please," said Evgeniy, careful to maintain his cheer, lacing his fingers together. "That is not at all what I'm asking. Even here you are too wise for such duties, I have always thought you so. No, I do not wish you to accompany my wife but to attend to her at a distance. You have a watchful nature, everyone knows this. I simply want you to keep such a watch over my wife while she is away."

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Zhmuhin's eyes narrowed. He returned to his seat.

"What need is there to keep a watch over your wife?" he asked. "When I look at your wife, I see a grown woman who does not need a guardian. Don't you agree, Mr. Dridirit?" That sly smile had returned, and Evgeniy detected some hint of salacity behind the porter's comments. He chose to ignore the man's studied insolence.

"Before our marriage, my wife was surrounded by her family in Petersburg," Evgeniy replied instead, "and here she enjoys my guardianship, of course. Certainly she is a grown woman, but I have discovered that she is so young still in many ways, simple in her thoughts and her amusements, a naïf. Often I have called her my baby bird, merely a term of endearment, you see, and yet it is appropriate in so many ways that I had not intended. . . ." He stared down at the blotter on his desk, at the inkwell and the calligraphy pen, the papers, his political responsibilities—another world in which his wife would surely be lost, and he treasured her all the more for that. "This is her first time away on her own, you see, and perhaps I fret over her well-being too much."

They had completed their deal after that. Zhmuhin was merely to watch from a distance, not to intercede unless he found Anna Sergeyevna to be in some danger. Evgeniy in turn paid for Zhmuhin's transportation, his lodging and meals, and a remuneration of 100 rubles for the six weeks' work—more than half again his salary at the hotel for the same period, but the extra would ensure his attention and discretion.

During the first fortnight that his wife was away, Evgeniy began to receive short letters from her. She wrote of her walks in Verney's pavilion and in the public gardens, of the roughness of the seas in the days and the strange light upon it in the evenings, of how everyone gathered in the harbor for the arrival of the steamer. Evgeniy smiled over her letters, envying such simple pleasures, the easy amusements that he had never been the type to enjoy. He was grateful for a wife who could appreciate them so.

Then one morning, a messenger delivered a telegram to his office. The message itself was unsigned, but in some manner the block type itself bore a familiar insolence, and despite his incomprehension of the telegram's meaning, the words at once sent the blood rushing to Evgeniy's face.

"Baby bird has found her wings."

Two nights later, Philip sat in a rented Buick half a block from his own home, staring at the Land Rover that had just pulled to a stop at the curb, watching his wife escorted by another man across the lawn and into their front door. As he had throughout the evening, he struggled with the word *stalker* and its connotations. But he hadn't been stalking. He had no intention to do anything. He had merely been surveying. He was simply watching the story unfold.

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He should have been in Charlottesville at this point—the lie he'd told Catherine, the one he'd had to tell her. Research for his story, a quick trip to the Center for Russian Studies at UVA, dinner with a friend from college who lived there, someone he hadn't seen in a couple of years. "So I'll have a place to stay for free," he had explained, plausibly enough. "And it'll give the two of us a chance to catch up." He'd used the last phrase deliberately—the same that he'd used when talking to Catherine about Buddy—but she hadn't seemed to notice, and he alone had been left with a sour taste in his mouth.

So far, he'd put only a dozen miles on the rental, only a few miles between each stop: Buddy's neighborhood first, a series of squat bungalows half a century old, freshly painted, freshly landscaped, oversized SUVs out front. A pot of begonias had already bloomed on Buddy's own stoop; his porch swing slowly swayed nearby. Then to the restaurant, following the Land Rover across town to Glenwood Avenue and to the parking lot at 518—a couple of extra miles crisscrossing the streets near the restaurant, Jones to West, Lane to Boylan, the parking lots adjacent to 42nd Street Oyster Bar, Southend, and Ri Ra, couples leaning toward one another, groups talking and laughing, until he found Catherine's beige Camry on Harrington.

It was still back there now, he knew, abandoned for the evening, and he wondered once more what had been running through her head as she made that decision—him watching from just down the street as the two of them exited the restaurant together, the rest of the evening determined, she must have known, by whatever happened in that moment. She'd held her head low, looking down at the sidewalk; Buddy had leaned his face down to meet her eyes better, gestured for her to stay there, walked around into the parking lot. Catherine alone in front of the restaurant. Her head held low with regrets? with shame? lost in her thoughts? lost in anticipation? Philip imagined for a moment that she had been drinking, that she was drunk, that Buddy was taking advantage of her condition. Didn't it seem she was struggling to maintain her equilibrium? But no, her balance had been complete, her stance never swayed. He could almost smell the scent of her new perfume behind her ears, along her neck. She had looked up the moment he thought that. In the direction of Philip and the rented car? No, toward the tip of the Land Rover, waiting to turn out of the parking lot.

And now they had entered the house together, the story unfolding not as Philip would have chosen but, unfortunately, as he expected. He tapped his fingers against the steering wheel, its surface sticky with the sweat of someone else's hands.

A song ended on the radio and the announcer came on. Bob Rogers. WSHA. "The blues is the blues is the blues," Rogers said, his tone folksy, soothing. Philip thought of evening deejays in empty studios, alone with their passions. He thought of the people who listened to those deejays and about the shape of such a

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shared solitude. He had always felt apart from people—shy and self-aware—but Catherine had been patient with him, indulged his eccentricities. And what had he given her in return? What had he failed to give her that had sent her away?

He picked up the cell phone and dialed their home number.

"Hello, beautiful," he said when Catherine answered, careful to keep his tone light, determined not to betray his emotions.

"Hey," she said. "Are you almost to Charlottesville?"

"Almost," he said, pulling up the car a few feet, watching which lights went on in which rooms. "I'm driving into the city limits now. What have you been up to this evening?"

"I've been out, just got back in," she said. "I got a call soon after you left and ended up meeting some people down at 518. But about halfway through the meal, I felt sick to my stomach and ended up just coming home."

An internal complaint, Philip thought. *How ironic. How fitting.*

"Well, I hate that I'm so far away," he said. He searched for the shadows of movement between the half-closed blinds. "I hate for you to be sick and all alone like that."

"Yeah, I really do feel awful," she said. "But I'll be all right. Buddy ended up driving me back here, and Miriam said she'd come over and stay the night if I wanted her to."

"Buddy's there?"

"Yeah, he said he'd stay with me for a few minutes to make sure I'm okay." A light went on in the room where Philip worked. "And he hadn't seen the house yet, so this gives him a chance to see our place." The light went off again.

"Do you want me to come back?"

"You're hours away, hon," she said, her silhouette appearing at the living room window. "Don't be ridiculous. I'll be fine."

"Well, do you want me to call you back in a little while?"

"I'll be fine," she repeated, and he watched as she shut the blinds tightly. "Don't worry. It was just something I ate. You're almost there and I know you want to catch up with Mike. I'm just going to turn down the ringer and go to bed in a few minutes, just as soon as Buddy leaves."

Turn down the ringer. Go to bed. Catch up. Half-truths easier to tell than lies.

"So." His mind scrambled in vain for a new strategy. "I guess I'll just talk to you tomorrow, then."

"All right, hon. I'll give you a call on the cell when I get up, okay?"

"Okay," he said. And he saw the light in their bedroom come on. "Well, good night."

"Hey!" she said then. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?" he asked.

"How about 'I love you'?"

"I love you too," he replied, relieved that she had said this in

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front of Buddy. "I'll talk to you tomorrow. Feel better. Good night."

But his hopes gradually faded as the minutes stretched on. And it was more than an hour before the other man left the house. When the Land Rover pulled away from the street, Philip followed, dutifully.

Zhmuhin began to send letters after that, penned in his own awkward hand, bearing information about Anna Sergeyevna's indiscretions: how she had retired with the stranger to the sanctity of her hotel room; how the couple had shared a cab to Oreanda, where they had sat near a church and held hands as they stared at the sea; how they now took their meals together regularly; how they stole kisses in the square.

Zhmuhin was fastidious in his details: There was cream in the crab soup they shared at lunch on Tuesday; the wine they drank after dinner on Thursday was a Madeira, uncorked just for them. Zhmuhin had walked past them near the church in Oreanda, but had recognized no remorse in the man's eyes; the couple's kiss in the square was fleeting, the one in the garden approximately half a minute in duration. Gone was Zhmuhin's insolence, but his cold precision and simple matter-of-factness were perhaps more brutal, giving Evgeniy's grief little room for relief. Evgeniy wept like some sniveling child. His eyesight became bleary with tears and his face turned so red that he stayed home from the office. He caught the servants exchanging glances when he passed them in the house. What a poor excuse for a man he had become!

And what a poor choice he had made for handling this crisis. He should have traveled to Yalta at once, he would think later. He should have challenged the other man to a duel. He should have punished his wife for her indiscretion with the same firm justice with which he might forgive her for it afterwards. But instead he had written her a letter. *There is something wrong with my eyes,* he had explained. *Please come home as quickly as possible.* A weak lie to avoid a scandal. A coward's choice. He had signed it *Your husband* as if he needed to remind her of the fact—a thought whose shame he would also long bear.

Even as he dripped the wax onto the envelope and reached for his seal, he knew that any choice he made was a mistake. If he didn't confront the situation now, he would be unable to do so later. How could he admit to her in years to come that he had known all along, that he had borne her adultery in silence? And yet what ramifications would ensue if he acted rashly? His public might acquit him of any action he took now in defense of his home, but could they avoid looking upon him differently once they'd discovered him a cuckold? How would they ever trust him as a leader if they suspected that some mismanagement of domestic affairs had sent his wife into the arms of another man?

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Such was simply not possible. He sealed the wax.

WSHA had gone off the air at midnight, and hours of cold, dry static had whispered from the speakers as Philip drove restlessly through the night, haunted by images, miles of worry accumulating. The Land Rover at the curb, the light in the bedroom window, the cigarette in the street . . . the stale aftertaste of tequila from Catherine's kiss, the feel of her lips light on his forehead several nights before . . . the passions in her painting, the pizza in the microwave . . . her admission that Buddy was there when he called, her admission that she had slept with him before. Another man's hand rested on her hip, caressed her breast. Her fingers wandered in the hair of his chest, their lips met, their bodies twined. . . .

Chekhov had been right, he thought, still crafting the short story in his head, trying in vain still to distract himself from the other story, from all that had happened in recent hours. *Each of us does have two lives, one open and the other running its course in secret.* But Chekhov had missed the despair of never truly being able to know the other's secret existence, always balancing trust against doubt. Gurov had found some prurient irony in the idea of secret lives, Anna Sergeyevna had been torn asunder by her two worlds, and Evgeniy von Diderits . . . But it wasn't Evgeniy's story, after all, Philip recognized, the simplest truth. Anna's and Gurov's was the grand, conflicted passion. Von Diderits's life was static, negligible. Philip had simply chosen the wrong character. And while another man had been wooing and perhaps winning Catherine, Philip had stuck himself away in 1890s Russia, missing the chance to be of significance in his own story, precisely when he should have been strengthening his role.

But now he'd secured a place in both stories, had taken special pains to assure that his presence would be felt.

Dawn had broken by the time Philip drove the rented Buick back to his own house and parked it at the curb where the Land Rover had stood the night before. The neighborhood was now lit in soft tones. Sprinklers were rotating in a lawn down the street—set off by an automatic timer, as regular as clockwork, as if nothing had changed. In another yard, a cat stalked some animal unseen. As Philip walked toward his front porch, he heard the neighbor's door open and then saw her step out to pick up her paper. She stopped when she spotted him, and even from a distance he could sense her hesitancy, her apprehension. Did she not recognize him? He saw that she didn't have her glasses on. The Buick must have confused her too. Perhaps she suspected an early-morning burglar?

"Good morning, Mrs. Rosen," he called out, with a nervous wave. "Just me. Philip." *Yes, just like the sprinklers,* he told himself. *Act as if nothing has changed.* And then he thought, *But maybe she* has *seen me clearly, maybe it's not that she doesn't recognize me but that*

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she's sensed something better than she should. He quickly turned his key in the front door and pushed it inward, not waiting for a reply.

Once inside, however, he still felt himself an intruder, as if actually breaking into some strange house. He saw even the most familiar objects as if for the first time: a piece of pottery he and Catherine had picked up in Chatham County, a photograph of them on their honeymoon in London, Catherine's purse on the chair. The painting over the mantel seemed darker than usual. The fabric of the couch didn't quite match the floor. He noticed that a Mingus CD he had left in the player had been swapped out for Moby and that an empty bottle of Pinot Noir stood on the kitchen counter. Two glasses sat in the sink.

Had Buddy touched this newspaper on the counter? Which chair had he sat in? The carpet runner in the hallway had been kicked up at the corner. The hand towel in the bathroom had a streak of grime. Was that another man's piss on the rim of the toilet? Under the fluorescent lights, he noticed that there were still traces of red on his hands—ink? No. Not ink. Not ink—not this time. He took a moment to wash them again and then waited to let them dry in the air, reluctant to share the hand towel that the other man had touched.

In their bedroom, the rising sun crept around the edges of the window, leaving the room in morning twilight, and Philip detected the thick scent of black currants again, wildflowers. Beneath the sheets wrapped around her, Catherine's breasts rose and fell in easy rhythms. Her black hair strayed out across the pillow, and a mascara stain marked the case, almost in the shape of an eyelash itself. Someone had propped a condom against the edge of the alarm clock. Durex. Unopened.

Sitting down in the chair in the corner of the room, Philip twirled the condom in his hand, examined the edges of the wrapper, the expiration date, phrases from the package: "super thin for more feeling," "nonoxynol-9," "if erection is lost before withdrawal . . ." It was from a box of twelve in the bathroom, he knew, and he also knew that if he hadn't come home before she awoke, if he'd really been in Virginia, then the condom would have been returned to its spot, the evidence vanished. But unopened? He started to go into the bathroom and count the ones that remained in the box, to see if others were missing, but he couldn't remember with any certainty how many had been in there before he left. It had been awhile since they'd made love, he realized with regret, with shame.

Catherine shifted her weight, stretched an arm out to her side. Philip clasped the condom in his hand and moved up to the bed to sit beside her.

"Catherine," he said, "are you awake?" He laid his free hand on her arm, resisted an unexpected urge to shake it. "It's me. Philip."

"Philip?" she mumbled, still half asleep, leaning into his touch. Her eyes parted just slightly. "It's too early, Philip, it's—" Her body

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tensed, her eyes opened wide, she looked up at him bewildered. "Philip?" she said again, sitting up sharply. The sheet fell away from her bare breasts, and it struck him that Buddy had seen her nakedness too, and probably not just long ago. He watched her glance toward the clock, saw her confusion deepen. "Where . . . ? It's seven in the morning. I thought you were—"

"You said you were sick," he began, and despite himself he could hear the accusation seeping into his tone. "I came home because—" But even before he said them, he knew the words weren't right, that disguising the truth would make him no better than her. The very next moment would determine everything that came after. "I never left," he began, sternly, pridefully, measuring his anger. "No, I've been in Raleigh the whole time. I've used up a whole tank of gas, Catherine. I've been driving, I've been thinking. . . . I saw him, and I don't know what to make of it all, don't know what to make of you." He caught her glancing again at the clock, at the place where the condom no longer stood, and he felt his hand clenching tighter, the foil wrapper crinkling within. "Is this what you're looking for?" he asked with a sneer, and he flicked the condom onto the bedspread with his freshly washed hands. The evidence was there. She would have to admit the truth, confirm that he'd been right. Unopened or not, it was still proof. Intentions were—

But as he watched her face, her expression betrayed little. She stared down at the condom for a moment and then pushed her hair behind her ears, lifted her head to meet his gaze. As with everything else in the house, Philip had the vague sensation of seeing Catherine now for the first time: the cleft dividing her chin; those faint clusters of freckles across her cheeks, usually masked by powder; the uncommon color of her eyes. Her irises were a deep, impenetrable green, her pupils unfathomably opaque. He thought of the painting above the mantel, those swaths of color brushing against one another, connecting, parting. "Oh, Philip," she whispered, gently shaking her head, "why did you go away? Why did we need to do this?" and in her wry, pained smile he glimpsed the ragged edges of her secret life, forced open, unable to be hid. *My God,* he thought, *did I make this?*—his anger fleeing him now and some other dull feeling taking its place. The next step was inevitable, he saw then, already written, and he wanted desperately now to go back and mend things—everything that he'd opened up, to hide his own secret life, to leave everything hid.

"Philip," she said again, reaching out to take his hand in hers, "I have something to tell you." It was too late to stop it now, and he knew that whatever she said next he would try to believe, but he would never believe. And it was clear to him that no matter what happened, the most difficult and complicated part of it was likely just beginning. ●

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Lost and Found

by P.J. Parrish

He sat alone in the dark cruiser, staring out the windshield into the shimmering darkness. It was just starting to rain, more of a mist really, tiny glittery drops that seemed to fall from nowhere and disappear before they hit the ground.

He turned off the wipers and after a few moments the glass began to blur, the rain working like a slow silver paintbrush to erase his view of the bridge and the man on it.

A.J. sighed softly, tiredly. The car was a comforting cocoon of drifting shadows, blinking red radio lights, and the familiar hug of the old leather seat on his back.

There weren't many moments like this, so he held on to it for a while, maybe another full minute, before he hit the wipers again. In the wet glow of the cruiser's headlights, the bridge and the rookie standing on it came back into focus.

The rookie was young, with an awkward, bent-stick way of walking. His face, with his crooked Alabama smile, was eager, anxious, and hopeful. Not a whole lot different from the last rookie A.J. had. Or the one before him or the one before that one.

The bridge was old and plain, too big, really, for the trickle of brown water that flowed beneath it. The bridge's face, a stretch of plain, bleached concrete, was chipped and scarred by too many drunks, and smeared in more recent years with red and yellow slashes of gang graffiti.

The bridge seemed to be the only thing standing still in the drifting night. Maybe it was just the distant city lights as they played off the underbelly of the low-hanging clouds. Or maybe it was the fog slithering around the rookie's feet. Whatever it was, it was the kind of night that held something A.J. had felt before. It was the kind of night he always thought could crawl inside you and

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Kelly Nichols, aka P.J. Parrish, is the author of the critically acclaimed Louis Kincaid mystery series, coauthored with her sister, Kristy Montee. The books have made the bestseller lists of the *New York Times* and *USA Today*, and been nominated for the Edgar, Anthony, and Shamus awards. Their latest novel, *A Thousand Bones* (Pocket Books, July) is the debut of their spin-off series featuring Miami homicide detective Joette Frye.

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suck something out, something you couldn't see leaving but you could feel.

A. J. glanced out the side window, his mind drifting with the trickle of raindrops down the glass.

Lorraine liked these kinds of nights, but she never saw them like he did. He recalled her saying more than once, usually on one of their anniversaries, that it had been raining like this—this weird glittery kind of mist—when he proposed to her.

He smiled slowly. It was like they were being sprinkled with love dust, she said.

She had a special word for this kind of night, but right now he couldn't remember that, either. What had she called it?

Londonesque. Yeah. That was it. *Must be what London is like, don't you think, A.J.? Do you think we could go there on our honeymoon, A.J.?*

He never understood the word Londonesque, but he didn't tell her that. Never told her he didn't understand most of her fancy words. Didn't tell her he suspected she even made some up. They didn't go to London on their honeymoon. In fact, they hadn't gone anywhere on their wedding night. But Lorraine kept planning other "honeymoons" to other places. Places, like her made-up words, that she thought could make her someone or something else. Something smarter or prettier or better than what she was. A cop's wife.

A. J. had never been much farther than St. Louis, but for the moment, in this weather, and maybe because he was feeling a bit lonely lately, and a bit kindly toward Lorraine right now, he could imagine, if things had gone differently, that he and Lorraine might be in England. Strolling around the outside of one of those grand old castles, taking pictures of the stiff-lipped, fuzzy-hatted guys standing guard outside.

He sighed softly.

She'd been gone a long time now. Left him, married her dentist, and moved to Knoxville, where he knew they had no castles, but he guessed they had a few pink-bricked houses with big backyards. A few years later, he heard that the dentist had bought her a bigger house with a bigger yard. He didn't know where she lived now. Didn't know if she had ever gotten to England.

A. J. looked back at the rookie on the bridge.

His name was Andy. The leather jacket squared off his shoulders, making him look tougher and beefier than A. J. knew he was underneath the stiff leather. Andy's blue trousers were knife-creased, and speckled with rain and mud from the climb down the hill. They were a might short, too, and every time Andy leaned on the bridge, A. J. could see a flash of his bright white tube socks.

Andy's eyes, A. J. had noticed earlier, were a pale brown, the color of beach sand. Kind, trusting eyes, but eyes that held no sense of command. A. J. knew that people—bad people—noticed things

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like that. A nervous gesture, a tremor in the voice, a wrong step in the wrong direction, all those small things that told the bad guy who was in charge and who would win if it ever came down to it.

Andy would have to lose that look if he was going to survive.

A. J. shifted in his seat to ease the stiffness in his lower back and glanced at the clock, wondering where the detectives were. It was almost midnight, shift's end. Usually he could gauge the time pretty well without looking, and he was surprised it was this late. He raised his hand to the flickering computer screen to check his watch. The crystal was a little fogged and he blew on it to clear it. Sometimes that worked.

The watch was probably in its final days, but it had been a good watch, the kind a cop needed. Something that could get smacked against a wall, dropped in a lake, and even stepped on, and still just keep on ticking, like the old commercial said. When it died, he wouldn't throw it away. He would lay it to rest in his jewelry box along with all his old service pins and outdated badges.

It had been his daughter Sheila's last gift to him, given to him in June of 1998. He had thought it was a Father's Day gift until he realized it was wrapped in Christmas paper, left over from six months earlier when he hadn't shown up in Knoxville at the dentist's house like he promised he would.

Sheila didn't understand too many things back then, like how long it took to remove crumpled cars, wet Christmas presents, and dead bodies from a freeway interchange. She didn't understand that he had called the next morning to apologize and wish her a good Christmas. And she didn't understand that ex-wives had their own reasons for not giving daughters messages from their fathers.

He supposed most sixteen-year-old girls didn't understand stuff like that. They saw the world only through their own narrow, selfish prisms, and sometimes one tiny mistake could be that one thing they thought ruined their life forever. His not being there that Christmas was that one thing for Sheila.

He hadn't made it to Knoxville the following Christmas, either, but he had called and asked Sheila to come see him. The day before, she canceled, leaving a message on his answering machine telling him she had places to go and cool people she wanted to see over the holidays. A. J. wasn't one of them.

He tapped on the watch. The crystal was still clouded.

He wondered if the Seikos clouded up. Probably not. Those beauties were sterling silver, emblazoned with the police department logo, and inscribed with the officer's name on the back. They were given to officers after twenty-five years of service, presented in a satin-lined case by the chief at a ten-minute ceremony that the wives and children could attend.

A. J. reached down and picked up a half-eaten Hershey's bar off

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the console and broke off a square of chocolate.

The department had stopped giving out the watches last November. Said they couldn't afford it anymore, what with all the recent pay increases, EEOC-mandated promotions, lawsuits on excessive force, worker's-comp injuries, and the high cost of computers, radar guns, patrol cars, tin badges, and gasoline..

A.J.'s twenty-fifth anniversary was next month. He had mentioned that to Andy a few days ago, and Andy had asked why he didn't just buy a watch and have it inscribed to himself.

Don't ya think it loses just a little meaning that way, kid?

He looked back at Andy, hitting the wipers again to clear his view.

Suddenly Andy leaned over the railing and lost the rest of his country-fried steak dinner into the river. He coughed a few times, drew himself tall, and with trembling hands used a neatly folded handkerchief from his back pocket to wipe his mouth.

A.J. peered up at the sky. It was still raining, the drops floating from the sky like Lorraine's love dust, but not hard enough, he guessed, to drive the kid back inside the cruiser. He'd let him stay out there awhile.

In the pale glow of the lone streetlight, A.J. studied Andy's slender face. It looked ghostly and pained, and A.J. knew the ghostly part came from what lay under the bridge. But the pained part, well, that was something else.

It was embarrassment, something A.J. understood. No one wanted to lose their cookies in front of a senior officer. It was pretty damn undignified to puke all over your crisp blue trousers and your just-out-of-the-box Rockports.

A.J.'s eyes drifted along the empty bridge. Maybe there was something that happened to men when they stood on bridges, like standing in the middle of a bridge put them halfway in-between something good or bad. Or weak or strong. Or between yesterday and tomorrow.

He had stood on a bridge once. A high-arcing overpass near the airport. It had been his assigned post back in—when was it?—nineteen eighty-seven? Eighty-eight?

The ice had started dripping from the sky about nine A.M. By nine-thirty, two cars had slid off the overpass into the snowy banks below.

A.J. had been sent to the bridge to monitor traffic, slow speeders, and call ambulances for idiots who still thought they could race their way across a high patch of ice fifty feet in the air.

He had a ride-along passenger that day, some woman from a neighborhood-watch committee who the chief thought needed a tour of duty in order to gain a greater awareness of how hard the police were working on community relations.

It would have been a fine day, normally, with the ice storm a perfect setting to allow an epic display of police compassion. Except for the fact that A.J. had a touch of the flu that had settled in his

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intestines and he knew the moment he stopped the cruiser next to the overpass guardrail that it was going to be a long morning.

The stomach cramps started around ten, and by noon he was covered in a suit of ice, his fingers so frozen he could barely key the radio to ask to be briefly relieved.

The request was denied. Three times. He was needed, they said. There was no one else.

So he had toughed it out. Four hours, standing on the side of the overpass, waving his flashlight at the foggy, slow-moving headlights, his body shivering uncontrollably, shoes frozen to the road, and watery, burning shit running down the back of his legs.

The neighborhood-watch woman never asked what the smell in the cruiser was. But there was a look of disgust in her eyes as they made their way back to the precinct, like she thought he was some sort of animal who was too lazy or too uncivilized to use the toilet like decent human beings do.

The easy chatter of the radio pulled him back to the moment. Andy was still bent over the concrete wall, head in his hands. A.J. thought about going to him, but decided not to. He'd come back when he was ready.

The car was growing cold. A.J. reached over to flip up the heat. The fan rattled and the vent puffed out lukewarm air.

He was tapping on the vent when out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a folded paper on the passenger floorboard. He picked it up, and in the dim light he unfolded it. It was Andy's paycheck stub.

A.J. knew how much money Andy made. Because of the union, starting salaries were common knowledge, and were even posted on the department's Web site. But still, A.J. wanted to look.

Thirty-two thousand, one hundred and seventy-four dollars and three cents. Awful lot of money for a rookie who didn't know shit about what he was doing, or why.

His gaze moved to the deductions.

A hundred-buck automatic deposit to the First Bank of Tennessee. Union dues. Federal taxes. Social security. 401k contributions. Payroll-deducted equipment costs. The kid had bought himself a Kevlar vest.

A.J. looked to the dashboard, at the picture Andy had clipped there earlier tonight. The photo was of Andy's wife and baby. The woman, a wide-eyed beauty, looked a lot younger than Andy did, and the baby was so new it was still wrinkled.

He folded the check stub and set it on the seat. Thirty-two thousand was nowhere near enough.

A.J. made decent money now, decent enough, he guessed, for a single guy long past child support. But in the early years, when Lorraine was young and raising Sheila and trying to make a home for them, it had been a struggle. Later, after he lost track of

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Sheila, he had started sticking almost a third of his paycheck into a savings account. He had found a nice little cabin on Lake Arkabutla down in Mississippi and he wanted to buy it.

Eight grand into the plan, he met Spider Jackson, a trash-talking street germ with a big attitude and a bigger father who wielded one of the sharpest legal swords in the city and who had other political attachments, like the mayor's sister.

Spider had been caught red-handed selling stolen guns and, as all dirtbags do when they're high and scared, he resisted arrest. Bit a chunk of flesh out of one officer's hand, kneed another in the groin, and sliced open the abdomen of a third before he found himself in the back of the patrol car, alive but hurting.

A.J. never hit Spider. Didn't get there in time to do anything except drive him to the jail and escort him inside. All the way in, Spider was hollering how his daddy was going to sue everyone, but A.J. had heard it all before, and hadn't given it another thought until a few weeks later when his name showed up on a subpoena in a brutality lawsuit.

The car was too warm now. A.J. reached down and turned off the heat and used his sleeve to rub the condensation off the glass so he could keep an eye on Andy.

In the old days, people sued the city. Nowadays, they could sue officers, and that's what Spider's father did. In the end, the city settled their part of the lawsuit, and the jury divided the balance of the settlement up among the officers.

Later, the lawyer explained that since *all* the officers denied any culpability, the jury had no reason to believe that A.J. was the only one who was *really* innocent, and besides, he said, you know better than anyone that to some people you're all just white faces in blue uniforms.

The court took the eight thousand in one lump sum, and set up a payment plan for the rest. His final payment was due in August of this year.

A.J. reached down to pick up his coffee cup. His fingers had stiffened up again and he couldn't grab the cup the way most folks grabbed things, so he picked it up with his index finger and his thumb, transferring it to his left hand to drink it.

He looked down at his hand. His pinkie finger was gone, shot off by a punk-ass armed robber firing blindly as he tumbled his way down a fire escape. The bullet had ripped through A.J.'s palm, mangling the tendons and severing the pinkie.

Another cop had been on the fire escape that day. His partner, dead from a shot to the head, lying there on the black iron, his blue eyes open toward the sky, his gun still in his holster.

A.J. had seen it happen. But even now, he couldn't remember it well. All he could remember feeling at that moment was *his* pain and *his* fear and all those other selfish emotions that come when

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you think you're going to die.

He could remember the funeral a few days later. The long line of police cars crawling along the freeway and the smell of the white mums and the saddest damn music he ever heard at a grave site.

And he remembered the endless rows of uniforms, and the stiff, solemn faces looking at him from the other side of the casket, silently wondering why two veteran cops hadn't been able to catch one sixteen-year-old dirtbag. Wondering why A.J. hadn't managed to fire off one single round from his weapon, because he was, they knew, the first one out the window. Wondering all of that, but never saying a word.

A.J. laid his head back against the seat and took a second to close his eyes.

His dead partner had four ex-wives, but not one came to the funeral, so it had been A.J. who had accepted the folded American flag afterwards. Lorraine had put the flag on the top shelf of the closet. Said she put it there so she wouldn't have to look at it and be reminded every day of just how suddenly she could be a widow, too.

Right after, the department had stuck A.J. behind a desk in the traffic division, saying that because of the finger, he couldn't shoot accurately anymore. Maybe afraid, too, he couldn't pull his gun quickly enough to keep from getting shot himself. That year they had paid out three hundred grand in widow's pensions, they said, and they couldn't afford any more.

He had stayed at the desk in the traffic division for over a year, silently slogging through paperwork. Every night, he'd uncap the bottle of Jim Beam and try to tune out Lorraine's whining and find some peace. Finally, Lorraine told him if he wanted some peace, she'd be happy to give it to him. The next day she was gone.

Days after, when he was looking for his old revolver, he found the folded flag behind some Rolling Stones records. He stood there in his bedroom, holding it in his hands, thinking he needed to find some place of honor for it, somewhere better than in the top of a dusty closet.

He bought a new case for it, a triangular one with polished oak edges that the flag could just sit right in, and he set it on the kitchen counter, next to the ever-present bottle of Jim Beam.

A few weeks later, the flag was still there. The bottle was gone and he had not replaced it.

He practiced at the range for a month, always alone, too embarrassed to let anyone see his fumbling. Finally, he found enough agility in his hand and enough confidence in himself to ask for another shot at requalifying. A week later, he was back behind the wheel of a cruiser.

That's when he finally understood what Lorraine felt, trapped in a life and feeling second-rate, so invisible that you plan honeymoons you're never going to take.

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A calm female voice came from the radio, calling to him. A.J. keyed his mike and acknowledged her.

"Looks like the detectives are about five minutes out," she said.

A.J. thanked her and clicked off.

Andy was leaning against the half-wall, staring out at the darkness. A.J. figured he was done throwing up, and was now probably just trying to unscramble things in his head. A wisp of fog curled around Andy's legs, then disappeared. For a second, everything was clear and silent, as if the darkness was holding its breath.

Andy would be different in the morning, A.J. knew. He wouldn't know why, because he didn't understand that this was the kind of moment that you lose a piece of yourself in, a sliver of something taken away by that invisible thing that crawls inside you and leaves just as quickly, without letting you know what it took.

Andy wouldn't miss it much right away, but over time, one day, if he found himself sleepless and alone, he might wonder where it went and if he could get it back.

Andy gave out a sigh deep enough to raise his shoulders, then he turned and looked toward the cruiser. He was ready now.

A.J. pushed out of the car and started across the bridge. Andy stepped forward under the light. He had some color back, but his forehead was still beaded with sweat or rain. He lowered his eyes, then forced himself to look back up.

"How ya feeling?" A.J. asked.

When Andy found his voice, it was still thick with the scorch of vomit. "Don't tell the guys I lost my dinner, okay?"

"Not a problem," A.J. said.

Andy's eyes drifted reluctantly back to the edge of the railing, then down toward the water, but he didn't move from his spot. He looked lost as to how he should behave or where he should keep his eyes. A.J. stepped forward and placed a hand on the wet concrete railing. He looked down.

The inky water slithered alongside a bank of thick brush, rounded rocks, and cypress trees. One of the trees had been shattered a lifetime ago by a powerful bolt of lightning. In the dim light, the branches looked burnt.

That's where she lay. In the arms of the dead tree.

Her name was Tammy.

They had gotten the missing person's report almost two weeks ago, just another thirteen-year-old girl with a juvenile record, a know-it-all attitude, and a boyfriend who thought it was sexy to cover her neck in hickeys.

A.J. and Andy had been called to take the initial report, and he had let Andy take the lead. They had stood in the dirty, cramped living room, Andy's pen poised over his notebook. The mother had been unable to remember much about her daughter, except that maybe recently she had dyed her hair red, but she wasn't sure if it was still

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red now, or some other color. She didn't know the last names of any of her daughter's friends. She wasn't even sure if her daughter had attended school that day. Sometimes she skipped, the mother said.

Andy had stood there, looking down at an almost blank page in his notebook. Later, on the way to the cruiser, Andy had paused and looked back at the house.

It's like she was lost long before she was lost, Andy had said.

Then, the mother had come to the porch, calling to them, offering one final recollection:

Hey, officers . . . she had this pink T-shirt she loved, something with rhinestones on the front that said Too Hot to Handle. *She's probably wearing that.*

A. J. turned on his flashlight and shined it down into the black branches. In the thin beam of white light, the pink T-shirt looked more like a rag, the fabric eaten away by eleven days of cold, rushing water. The ribbed collar hung loose around her black, decaying neck.

For a second, he thought he could see the glint of one of the rhinestones, but he knew he must be wrong. The stones would be moldy now, their shine lost in the muddy water, if they were even still there.

The T-shirt was the only piece of clothing on her body.

He looked back at Andy.

Andy had finally come to the edge and was staring down at her, the look on his face a mix of morbid curiosity and horror.

"Not going to get sick on me again, are you?" A. J. asked.

"No, sir," Andy said, drawing a deep breath. "It's a little easier the third and fourth time."

A. J. clicked off the flashlight. "It's never easier."

They both turned away from the body and leaned their hips against the railing. In the distance, A. J. could hear a siren, and knew in a few minutes the road would be lit with half a dozen sets of headlights.

"If it doesn't get easier," Andy said, "how does anyone do this for twenty-five years?"

"You just find ways," A. J. said. "And you find things. Like finding this girl. If you hadn't needed to take a leak, we wouldn't have found her. But you did need to take a leak and we did find her. And now she can go home. And that's what you think about."

"So finding her is a good thing?" Andy asked.

"Yeah."

"Will we get any recognition for finding her?"

"Nope."

Andy thought about that for a minute, then took the flashlight from A. J.'s hand. He shined it back down into the tree limbs, holding it on the pink shirt for a long time. From the brush and trees below, the chirr of crickets was starting up and they both stood there for a moment, listening.

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"I don't ever want to forget this moment," Andy said.

"You won't."

Andy set the flashlight down, pointing it so the beam ran along the top of the half-wall. He drew a pocketknife from his pants and flipped it open.

"What are you doing?" A.J. asked.

Andy bent over the railing and started carving in the concrete. A.J. glanced down the road for the cruisers, then back at Andy. Andy's knife was scraping furiously against the hard surface.

The first headlights were coming down the road when Andy brushed away the gray dust and put his knife in his pocket. Then he walked off to meet the arriving cruiser.

A.J. picked up the flashlight and shined it down on Andy's scratchings to see what he had written.

I FOUND TAMMY. BADGE #221.

A.J. turned to look at Andy as he walked down the bridge toward the flashing blue lights. Despite the mud and rain that spattered his sleeves and trousers, his step was sure and his shoulders were straight.

A. J. watched him for a moment, then looked back to the carving. After a moment, he pulled out his own pocketknife and worked the rusty blade open.

Under Andy's inscription, he wrote one of his own. ●

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 129, No. 6. Whole No. 790, June 2007. USPS 523-610, ISSN 0013-6328. Dell GST: R123054108. Published monthly except for combined March/April and September/October double issues by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $43.90 in U.S.A. and possessions, $53.90 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-220-7443 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Editorial Offices, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. *Executive Offices 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.* Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and at additional mailing offices.
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ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
CONNIE GOON
Advertising Sales Coordinator
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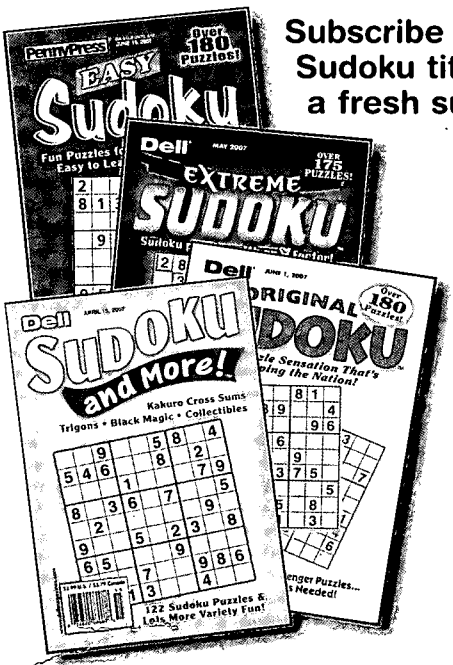

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